Interpreting the UPANISHADS

ANANDA WOOD
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Preface

Do we know anything that is plainly and simply true, without any of the ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ that complicate everything we perceive through our limited and uncertain personalities?

And is it thus possible to find any common basis of knowledge on which we can always rely, no matter what particular conditions and uncertainties surround our little bodies, senses and minds in a much larger universe?

The Upanishads are early texts that describe just such an enquiry into plain truth. However, there are two problems which complicate our understanding of these texts today.

First, they were composed at a time when knowledge was largely expressed in the imaginative metaphors of myth and ritual. Thus, along with their philosophical enquiry, the Upanishads also describe an archaic mythical and ritual context. It is from this archaic context that the enquiry was made, in times that are now long passed.

And second, as the founding texts of a very old philosophical tradition, they are expressed in a highly condensed way: which leaves them rather open to interpretation and explanation. The condensed statements of the Upanishads were called ‘shruti’ or ‘heard’; because they were meant to be learned by hearing them directly from a living teacher, who would recite and interpret the words. Having received such a statement of condensed philosophical teaching, a student was meant to think about it over and over again, through a sustained process of individual reflection and enquiry. Eventually, after passing through many stages of thinking and rethinking the questions involved, the student was meant to come at last to a thorough and independent understanding of the statement, in his or her own right.

In the two and a half thousand years or more since the Upanishads began to be composed, their original statements have been interpreted and explained in many different ways, through many different schools of thought. Some schools have emphasized a religious approach to truth, through devotion to a worshipped God. Some schools have emphasized a mystical approach, through exercises of meditation that cultivate special states of experience beyond the ordinary limitations of our minds. And some schools emphasize a philosophical approach, through reasoned enquiry into common experience.
This book is focused on the philosophical approach. It follows Shrī Shankara’s Advaita Vedānta tradition, as interpreted by Shrī Ātmānanda, a modern advaita philosopher who lived in Kerala State, India, 1883-1959.

The book asks how some ideas from the Upanishads can be translated into modern terms. This is a somewhat different approach from directly translating the texts. For each idea, selected passages have been translated and placed alongside much freer retellings that incorporate a fair degree of interpretation and commentary.

The retellings have been reproduced from a companion volume, called From the Upanishads. The abbreviation FTU refers to this companion volume, in page number references that show from where the retellings have been reproduced.

Hence this book and its companion volume form a pair, with cross-references between them. However, each volume can be read quite independently of the other.

Like the original texts, the book is perhaps best read as an anthology of collected passages. Because of their condensed expression, the Upanishads are meant to be thought about selectively, concentrating attention on one passage at a time. In various different passages, the same fundamental principles are approached again and again, in various different ways. Thus, one is free to pick out a particular passage that suits one’s interests and one’s state of mind at the time.

The trick is to avoid confusing the differing approaches through which the Upanishads ask different questions about one common truth. Then one can concentrate on those particular passages and those particular questions that hold one’s attention sufficiently for the hard thinking that the subject requires.
‘This’ and ‘that’

On the whole, the language of the Upanishads is simple. The main problems of interpretation do not come from any excessive complexity of grammar, nor from overly long and technical words. Since the language used is an early form of classical Sanskrit, there is sometimes a little trouble with the occasional archaic usage whose meaning may not be fully remembered; but this is relatively minor and peripheral.

The more basic problem comes from the philosophical character of the Upanishads. Their essential purpose is to stimulate reflection and enquiry. So they often raise questions about what words and concepts mean. This applies particularly to ordinary, common words like ‘know’ or ‘be’, or ‘true’ or ‘real’, or ‘self’ or ‘world’, or ‘this’ or ‘that’. While the meaning of such words is open to question, so too is the interpretation of the Upanishads, which use these words in a way that puts them up for questioning.

In the peace invocation that is often placed at the beginning of the Brihadâranyaka and Ísha Upanishads, there is a striking example of simple language thus used to provoke thought. The language is so simple that it is possible to make a somewhat intelligible word for word translation of the relevant passage1, with the order of the words unchanged:

- पूर्णम अदह पूर्णम इदम (The full, that; the full, this.)
- पूर्णत पूर्णम उदचयते (From the full, the full arises.)
- पूर्नाया पूर्णम अदाय (Of the full, the full taken back,)
- पूर्णम एवावशिष्यते (the full alone remains.)

Though just about intelligible, the translation is of course awkward. First, there is a problem of idiom. ‘The full, that’ is a common Sanskrit construction whose idiomatic equivalent in English is: ‘That is the full.’ Similarly, ‘the full taken back’ could be translated more idiomatically as ‘when the full is taken back’. Second, by translating the word ‘पूर्णम’ too narrowly, as ‘the full’, the philosophical implications are not quite rightly conveyed. ‘Pūrṇam’ also means ‘complete’. In the context of the Upanishads, this clearly refers

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1Though often placed in the peace invocation at the beginning of the Brihadâranyaka and Ísha Upanishads, the passage may also be found in the Brihadâranyaka Upanishad 5.1.
to ‘complete reality’, which might be better translated as ‘all’. So to try making the translation less awkward, perhaps it could be modified as follows:

That is all. This is all.
All arises out of all.
Of all, when all is taken in,
what remains is only all.

This is still quite a literal translation, and it is now in fluent English; but it has a problem of tone. At worst, it could be read as silly doggerel, showing up the absurdity of mystical philosophy. At best, it could be construed to have a tone of mocking irony, using a light-hearted facade to say something more profound. In neither case does it convey the philosophical tone of quiet certainty that is found in the original.

The trouble is that cryptic utterances like ‘All arises out of all’ are no longer taken seriously, in modern philosophical discussion. In fact, they are held up as glaring examples of ‘trivial’ or ‘tautological’ or ‘woolly’ or ‘fuzzy’ language, which serves as a cover for half-baked ideas that have not been properly questioned and tested. If anyone makes this kind of cryptic statement today, the immediate response, quite rightly, is that the speaker should explain further and be more specific about what is meant.

How does one try to solve this problem of tone in translating the simple, but sometimes cryptic statements of the Upanishads? There is a temptation to dress up the translation in strange or complicated language, to make it seem that hidden depths are lurking below; but this would be merely pretentious. The only way out is to make a specific interpretation; and to translate accordingly, perhaps adding some further explanation and commentary.

In the above passage from the peace invocation, the words ‘that’ and ‘this’ need more specific interpretation. So does the word ‘pūrṇam’, which is not quite adequately translated as ‘the full’ or as ‘all’. In the retelling reproduced below (from FTU, page 42), the word ‘that’ is interpreted as the known world; the word ‘this’ is interpreted as the knowing self; and ‘pūrṇam’ is interpreted as complete reality, which is both knower and known. Accordingly, the passage is taken to describe reality as non-dual consciousness: underlying all mentally created divisions of experience into ‘this’ which knows and ‘that’ which is known. From underlying consciousness, all appearances of objects arise: as they are perceived by body, senses and mind. And back to this same consciousness, all appearances return: as they are understood and assimilated into knowledge.
That world out there, this self in here,
each is reality, complete:
from which arises everything,
to which all things return again,
in which all seeming things consist;
which stays the same, unchanged, complete.

However, there are other ways of interpreting this passage, as can be seen by comparing a few available translations. Many of them use the traditional concept of ‘brahman’: which can be thought of as all-inclusive reality, underlying the creation and appearance of everything in the universe.

In the Ramakrishna Math’s publication, *The Brhadâraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, ‘that’ is interpreted as ‘Brahman’, and ‘this’ is interpreted as the ‘universe’. ‘Pûrṇam’ is translated as ‘infinite’. Accordingly, the passage is taken to describe reality as ‘the infinite (Brahman)’ from which the universe emanates and into which the universe is assimilated. The resulting translation is:

That (Brahman) is infinite, this (universe) too is infinite. The infinite (universe) emanates from the infinite (Brahman). Assimilating the infinitude of the infinite (universe), the infinite (Brahman) alone is left.

Swámi Śarvānanda, in *Īśavāsyopaniṣad*, translates ‘that’ as ‘the invisible’ and ‘this’ as ‘the visible’. ‘Pûrṇam’ is translated as ‘the Infinite’. Accordingly, the passage is taken to describe reality as ‘the Infinite’: from which the visible universe ‘has come out’, while the underlying ‘Infinite remains the same’. The translation is:

The invisible is the Infinite, the visible too is the Infinite. From the Infinite, the visible universe of infinite extension has come out. The Infinite remains the same, even though the infinite universe has come out of it.

Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, in *The Upanishads*, translate ‘that’ as ‘the things we see not’ and ‘this’ as ‘the things we see’. ‘Pûrṇam’ is translated variously: as ‘filled full with Brahman’, as just ‘Brahman’, and as ‘all’ or ‘all that is’. Accordingly, the passage is taken to describe reality as all-filling ‘Brahman’, out of which ‘floweth all that is … yet he is still the same’. The result is a relatively free and stylish translation, as follows:
Filled full with Brahman are the things we see,
Filled full with Brahman are the things we see not,
From out of Brahman floweth all that is:
From Brahman all – yet he is still the same.

R.C. Zaehner, in *Hindu Scriptures*, translates ‘that’ as ‘beyond’, ‘this’ as ‘here’, and ‘pûrṇam’ as ‘fullness’. The result is a relatively close, yet stylish translation, as follows:

Fullness beyond, fullness here:
Fullness from fullness doth proceed.
From fullness fullness take away:
Fullness yet remains.

S. Radhakrishnan, in *The Principal Upanishads*, makes a carefully literal translation and adds a short commentary. In the commentary, ‘that’ is interpreted as ‘transcendent’; ‘this’ as ‘immanent’; and ‘pûrṇam’ as ‘Brahman’, whose integrity is unaffected by the created universe.

*Translation:*

That is full; this is full. The full comes out of the full. Taking the full from the full the full itself remains.

*Commentary:*

Brahman is both transcendent and immanent.
The birth or the creation of the universe does not in any manner affect the integrity of Brahman.

Swami Sivananda, in *The Principal Upanishads*, also makes a fairly literal translation. But he adds the word ‘all’ before ‘that’ and ‘this’. And he translates ‘pûrṇam’ as ‘the Whole’. The result is:

The Whole is all That. The Whole is all This. The Whole was born of the Whole. Taking the Whole from the Whole, what remains is the Whole.

Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats, in *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, make a translation that is both graceful and nearly literal; by leaving ‘that’ and ‘this’ as they are, and by translating ‘pûrṇam’ as ‘perfect’. The translation is:
That is perfect. This is perfect. Perfect comes from perfect. Take perfect from perfect, the remainder is perfect.

What do these differing interpretations show? They show at least how one short passage of simple language can throw into question the meaning of concepts like ‘this’ and ‘that’, ‘full’ and ‘complete’, ‘creation’ and ‘dissolution’, ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’.
Consciousness

In the third chapter of the Aitareya Upanishad, an enquiry is made into the nature of self. The conclusion reached is simple. The true nature of self is ‘prajnyānam’ or ‘consciousness’.

In Sanskrit, the word ‘jñānam’ means ‘knowledge’. Used generally, it refers to all the various different kinds of knowledge: to all our various perceptions, thoughts and feelings, and to all the various expressions and instruments of knowledge that we interpret and use in the world. When the prefix ‘pra-’ is added, the meaning becomes more specific. In particular, the word ‘prajnyānam’ refers to ‘consciousness’: as the illuminating principle of experience, which is shared in common by all forms of knowledge.

The prefix ‘pra-’ can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it means ‘before’; and it thus implies a sense of ‘priority’: like the English ‘pre-’, as in ‘precede’. On the other hand, it means ‘forward’ or ‘onward’; and it thus implies a sense of ongoing continuity: like the English ‘pro-’, as in ‘proceed’.

In the first sense, where ‘pra-’ is taken to imply priority, ‘prajnyānam’ refers to consciousness as the underlying principle of illumination that must exist before any form of knowledge can appear. Consciousness is here described as the underlying basis of knowledge: which precedes all the various forms of knowledge that appear in our experience.

As experience changes, this underlying principle of consciousness continues, as that which knows the changes. It is always present, at every moment that we know; as the illuminating principle which is shared in common by all the various perceptions, thoughts and feelings that succeed each other in our minds. As different perceptions, thoughts and feelings appear and disappear, consciousness continues through experience, knowing all the changing appearances that come and go.

Thus, in the second sense of the prefix ‘pra-’, where it is taken to imply ongoing continuity, the word ‘prajnyānam’ refers to consciousness as the continuing principle of knowledge: which carries on through the changes and variations of experience. Here, consciousness is described as the basis of continuity that enables experience to proceed: as knowledge is passed on from past to future and from person to person.

In short, the word ‘prajnyānam’ defines consciousness through two essential characteristics: first, its self-evident priority, as the illuminating prin-
principle of all experience; and second, its changeless continuity, through all apparent change.

As the Aitareya Upanishad asks what self is, it goes through the various forms of experience that are attributed to a person’s self. And then it points out that all these forms of experience are only ‘prajnyānasya nāma-dheyāni’. They are only ‘attributed names of consciousness’. Or, in other words, they are only apparent attributes which signify the common principle of consciousness underlying them all. By implication, this self-evident and changeless consciousness is the true nature of self, to which the various forms of experience are attributed.

Having thus identified self as consciousness, the Aitareya Upanishad goes on to assert that consciousness is also the true reality of the whole world. This philosophical position is derived in three short statements.

1. ‘Prajnyā-netra lokah’: There is an interesting ambiguity here. The word ‘netra’ can mean either ‘eye’ or ‘leader’. Accordingly, the statement can mean: ‘The world is seen by consciousness.’ Or it can mean: ‘The world is led by consciousness.’ In the first case, the statement answers the question: how is the world known? Clearly, the world is known by consciousness, which illuminates the appearance of objects in each person’s experience. But then, what is the experience by which an object appears? The experience presupposes consciousness, without which there could be no appearance at all. Consciousness comes first, and the appearance of objects can only follow after it. Hence, the argument proceeds to the second meaning indicated above: ‘The world is led by consciousness.’

2. ‘Prajnyā pratishṭha’: ‘Consciousness is the foundation.’ This answers the question: if consciousness comes first, then how do objects exist? The existence of each object is established on the basis of consciousness. Whatever object may appear, and however it may appear, consciousness is always there: as an underlying basis of existence that all appearances show. But just such an underlying basis is also described by the word ‘reality’. What then is the relationship between ‘consciousness’ and ‘reality’? This question is answered in the third statement.

3. ‘Prajnyānam brahma’: ‘Consciousness is all there is.’ According to our usual way of thinking about experience, consciousness is that which illuminates each experience, and reality is that which the experience shows. However, even from this description, it is evident that consciousness and reality are always present together, throughout experience. Since both are always present, no person can ever experience one without the other. Though they are thought of differently, they can never be known apart; and so they are
Two different words are being used to describe the same thing. In truth, consciousness is the underlying reality of each object and of the whole world.

This is the conclusion that is meant to be reached and rigorously tested, by a careful and thorough examination of common experience.

To show how the third chapter of the Aitareya Upanishad has been retold in this book, the retelling is placed alongside a somewhat literal translation below. This is one of the more directly philosophical passages in the Upanishads, and hence it is an example of where the retelling is relatively close to the original text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation (from the Aitareya Upanishad)</th>
<th>Retelling (from FTU, pages 3-4)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.1.1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is this that we contemplate as ‘self’?</td>
<td>What is this self to which we pay such heed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which is the self?</td>
<td>Is it that which sees or hears or senses our perceptions of the world?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That by which one sees,</td>
<td>Does it speak?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or that by which one hears,</td>
<td>Does it tell taste from tastelessness?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or that by which scents are smelled;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or that by which speech is articulated,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or that by which taste and tastelessness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are known apart?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**3.1.2**

That which is this mind and this heart: perception, direction, discernment, consciousness, learning, vision, constancy, thought, consideration, motive, memory.

Or is it mind and heart: which we describe as wisdom, judgement, reason, knowledge, learning, vision, constancy, thought, consideration, motive, memory, imagination, purpose, life, desire, vitality?
imagination, purpose, 
life, desire, vitality?

All these are only attributed names of consciousness. These are but names for consciousness.

3.1.3

This is brahman, comprehending all reality.
This is Indra, chief of gods.
This is the creator, Lord Prajāpati;
all the gods;
and all these five great elements called ‘earth’, ‘air’, ‘ether’, ‘waters’, ‘lights’;
and these seeming complexes of minute things, and various seeds of different kinds; and egg-born creatures and those born of womb, and those born of heat and moisture, and those born from sprout;
horses, cattle, humans, elephants, and whatever living thing, moving and flying;
and that which stays in place.

Consciousness is everything: God, all the gods, the elements of which the world is made, creatures and things of every kind, however large or small, however born or formed, including all that breathes, walks, flies, and all that moves or does not move.
All that is seen, and led, by consciousness; and is established in consciousness.

The world is seen, and led, by consciousness.

Consciousness is the foundation.

Consciousness is all there is.

3.1.4

By this self, as consciousness, he ascended from this world; and, attaining all desires in that place of light, became deathless, [that] became.

All these are known by consciousness, and take their stand in consciousness. Coming after consciousness, the whole world stands in consciousness.

Consciousness is all there is.

One who knows self, as consciousness, has risen from this seeming world to simple truth: where all desires are attained and deathlessness is realized.
Consciousness and perception

In the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, one story is actually told twice, with much of it repeated word for word, but with a little variation and addition. In this story, Yājnyavalkya distinguishes two different kinds of knowledge. The first kind of knowledge is called ‘vijnyānam’ or ‘prajnyānam’. ‘Vijnyānam’ means ‘knowing apart’, and it refers to the discerning knowledge that knows truth from falsehood. ‘Prajnyānam’ means ‘knowing before’, and it refers to the underlying basis of consciousness that must be present before any apparent knowledge can arise.¹

In one version of the story, Yājnyavalkya describes the self as ‘vijnyānahana’, which means ‘nothing but discerning consciousness’. In the other version, Yājnyavalkya describes the self as ‘prajnyānahana’, which means ‘nothing but underlying consciousness’. In either case, the true nature of the self is identified with the first kind of knowledge: as pure consciousness, unmixed with anything other than itself.

Immediately after this, Yājnyavalkya remarks that what appears must disappear; and then he says abruptly: ‘Having arrived, there is no knowledge.’ But he is now using a different word for knowledge. The word he now uses is ‘sanjnyā’ (short for ‘sanjnyānam’), which means ‘knowing with’. This is the second kind of knowledge: the apparent knowledge of perception, where consciousness appears mixed with perceived objects. And Yājnyavalkya is saying that it turns out to be non-existent, once truth has been attained.

Yājnyavalkya’s wife Maitreyī is confused, and tells him so. He replies by distinguishing duality from non-duality. In duality, one thing is taken to perceive another; and this assumption underlies our apparent knowledge of the world perceived by body, senses and mind.

In non-duality, all that is known is nothing but the knowing self; and this pure consciousness is the true knowledge by which the self illumines experience. Where such true knowledge has been reached, the apparent knowledge of dualistic perception turns out to be non-existent; because it is a mere appearance that is itself nothing but consciousness.

To attain true knowledge, Yājnyavalkya tells Maitreyī that all she needs is a simple question: ‘How can the knower be known?’ And with these words,

¹For further discussion, see page 6.
he leaves home; so that Maitreyī is left to go on asking the question for herself.

In what follows, the two original versions are first translated, showing their differing and common passages. Where the two versions differ, their translations are placed side by side. Where they are the same, their common translation is placed in the middle of the page.

After these translations, the retelling from this book is reproduced alongside the second version’s translation, to help the reader compare. The retelling makes use of both original versions.

One particular problem here is to express the distinction of true and apparent knowledge in modern language. In order to do this:

- The word ‘vijñānam’ is translated as ‘discerning consciousness’ or, more shortly, as ‘knowledge’ or ‘understanding’.
- The word ‘prajñānam’ is translated as ‘consciousness’.
- The word ‘sañjñā’ is translated as ‘mixed, perceiving consciousness’ or, more shortly, as ‘perception’.
- An explanation is interpolated into the retelling, where Yājñavalkya responds to Maitreyī’s confusion about ‘sañjñā’ (perception). This interpolation is meant to show, a little more explicitly than the original text, how questions of perception lead on to a consideration of non-dual consciousness.

**Translations** (from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.4.12</th>
<th>4.5.13</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘It is as if</td>
<td>Just as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a lump of salt</td>
<td>the essence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thrown into water</td>
<td>salt itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>were dissolved</td>
<td>has no inside,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>into mere water;</td>
<td>has no outside,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘and what there is of it</td>
<td>‘but consists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can’t be picked out,</td>
<td>entirely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but from wherever taken</td>
<td>of taste alone;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is just salty.</td>
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</table>

*Consciousness and perception*
'So too, dear wife, this infinite, unbounded being is throughout 'nothing else but pure, discerning consciousness.'

‘But consists entirely of nothing else but consciousness.'

‘That which has come together, rising from these elements, vanishes away along with them. ‘Having arrived, there is no mixed, perceiving consciousness.

‘That’s what I say, dear wife,’ said Yājñavalkya.

2.4.13

Maitreyī said:

‘Just here, dear husband, you have confused me, where you say: “Having arrived there is no mixed, perceiving consciousness.”’

4.5.14

Maitreyī said:

‘Just here, dear husband, you have put me into confusion. ‘This I don’t quite understand.’

He said: ‘Dear wife, I am not really saying anything confusing.
‘It is sufficient for understanding. ‘The self is not what vanishes. It is by nature indivisible and indestructible.

2.4.14

‘For where duality seems to arise,

‘there one thing smells something else,

‘there one thing sees something else,

‘there one thing hears something else,

‘there one thing speaks something else,

‘there one thing thinks something else,

‘there one thing knows something else.

4.5.15

‘For where duality seems to arise,

‘there one thing sees something else,

‘there one thing smells something else,

‘there one thing tastes something else,

‘there one thing speaks something else,

‘there one thing hears something else,

‘there one thing thinks something else,

‘there one thing knows something else.

‘But, where all of this has become the self alone:

‘there by what can what be smelled,

‘there by what can what be seen,

‘there by what can what be heard,
'there by what
can what be said,
‘there by what
can what be thought,
‘there by what
can what be known?
‘there by what
can what be said,
‘there by what
can what be heard,
‘there by what
can what be thought,
‘there by what
can what be touched,
‘there by what
can what be known?

‘How can one know
that by which
all this is known?

‘This is that self
which is
“not this, not that”.

‘It is ungraspable,
for it is not grasped.
It is imperishable,
for it does not perish.
It is detached,
for it is not attached.

‘Unrestricted,
it is not disturbed
nor suffers harm.

‘Dear wife,
how can
the knower
be known?’

‘Dear wife,
how can
the knower
be known?

‘You are thus
explicitly instructed,
Maitreyī.
‘Just this, dear wife, 
is deathlessness.’

Having said this, 
Yājñavalkya 
went away.

Translation (from the 
Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad) 

Retelling 
(from FTU, pages 97-99)

4.5.13

‘Salt that is dissolved in water 
cannot be picked out by fingers, 
can’t be held by grasping hands. 
It’s not a separate lump of salt; 
it has no outside nor inside.

‘But it is there in every drop, 
for each drop tastes of saltiness.

‘So too, the self is everywhere; 
though it can’t be picked out by senses, 
cannot be conceived by mind. 
It’s not a bounded piece of world; 
it has no outside nor inside.

‘But it’s here, in all experience, 
always here, as consciousness.

‘All mind and sense, and all the objects 
they perceive, are formed from changing 
elements; in course of time, 
they all must change and pass away.

‘Wherever knowledge is attained, 
no such perception can remain.’

Just as 
the essence 
salt itself 
has no inside, 
has no outside, 
‘but consists 
entirely 
of taste alone;

‘Salt that is dissolved in water 
cannot be picked out by fingers, 
can’t be held by grasping hands. 
It’s not a separate lump of salt; 
it has no outside nor inside.

‘But it is there in every drop, 
for each drop tastes of saltiness.

‘So too, the self is everywhere; 
though it can’t be picked out by senses, 
cannot be conceived by mind. 
It’s not a bounded piece of world; 
it has no outside nor inside.

‘But it’s here, in all experience, 
always here, as consciousness.

‘All mind and sense, and all the objects 
they perceive, are formed from changing 
elements; in course of time, 
they all must change and pass away.

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though it can’t be picked out by senses, 
cannot be conceived by mind. 
It’s not a bounded piece of world; 
it has no outside nor inside.

‘But it’s here, in all experience, 
always here, as consciousness.

‘All mind and sense, and all the objects 
they perceive, are formed from changing 
elements; in course of time, 
they all must change and pass away.

‘Wherever knowledge is attained, 
no such perception can remain.’
‘That’s what I say, dear wife,’ said Yājñavalkya.

At this point, Yājñavalkya paused, with the remark: ‘Well, that’s what I say.’

4.5.14

Maitreyī said:

‘Just here, dear husband, you have put me into confusion. This I don’t quite understand.’

He said: ‘Dear wife, I am not really saying anything confusing. ‘The self is not what vanishes. It is by nature indivisible and indestructible.

Yājñavalkya replied: ‘It isn’t really confusing, if you distinguish the changing perception of apparent objects from the continuing basis of consciousness into which each perception is absorbed.

Explanatory interpolation

‘As perceptions are absorbed, they’re known as mere appearances produced by acts of sense and mind that part reveal and part conceal the nature of reality. Thus understood, they are dissolved in underlying consciousness.

‘And consciousness is that which knows appearances, as mind and sense perceive a world of changing things.

‘But no appearance can exist apart from knowing consciousness. Any appearance that departs from consciousness must disappear at once, and is no longer there.'
'Thus, no appearance has any existence outside consciousness; and all of the reality that each appearance truly shows is nothing else but consciousness.

'As consciousness illuminates appearances of seeming world, in truth, it only knows itself.

'In it, there's no duality of knowing self and object known. It is at once the self that knows and all that's ever really known.

4.5.15

'For where duality seems to arise,
‘there one thing sees something else,
‘there one thing smells something else,
‘there one thing tastes something else,
‘there one thing speaks something else,
‘there one thing hears something else,
‘there one thing thinks something else,
‘there one thing touches something else,
‘there one thing knows something else.

'Duality seems to arise where it appears that something sees or hears or smells or tastes or touches something else besides itself;

‘or where it seems that something speaks about or thinks about or knows some object other than itself.
But, where all of this has become the self alone:
there by what can what be seen,
there by what can what be smelled,
there by what can what be tasted,
there by what can what be said,
there by what can what be heard,
there by what can what be thought,
there by what can what be touched,
there by what can what be known?

How can one know that by which all this is known?

This is that self which is “not this, not that”.
‘It is ungraspable, for it is not grasped. It is imperishable, for it does not perish. It is detached, for it is not attached.

Unrestricted, it is not disturbed nor suffers harm.

But when all things are realized as nothing else but self alone, by whom can what be seen? By whom can what be heard, smelled, tasted, touched, described, conceived, desired and known?

By whom is knowledge truly known?

The knowing self cannot be any kind of object in the world.

‘Not this, nor that, nor here, nor there in space or time, it never can be anything perceived through any faculty of any body or of any sense or mind.
‘Dear wife, how can the knower be known? You are thus explicitly instructed, Maitreyī. Just this, dear wife, is deathlessness.’

‘You are thus explicitly instructed, Maitreyī. This is the instruction that you asked. Such is the way to deathlessness.’

Having said this, Yājñavalkya went away.

‘It is unowned, can’t be possessed; it does not die, does not decay, is unattached, cannot be bound or limited or qualified; nor can it ever suffer harm or be disturbed in any way.

‘Thus, deathlessness may be attained by asking, till no lies remain: “How can the self that knows be known?”’

‘Maitreyī, this is the instruction that you asked. Such is the way to deathlessness.’

With these words, Yājñavalkya left home.
Creation

Underlying reality

In the Vedas, the Upanishads and other texts of the Indian tradition, the creation of the perceived universe is described over and over again, in a bewildering variety of different ways that often seem to contradict one another. Given this rich variety of different descriptions, an obvious question arises. Why did the Indian tradition keep trying to describe creation like this, in so many different ways?

Is there some fundamental principle that these various descriptions are trying to describe in common, beneath their apparent differences and contradictions? And is this same fundamental principle also investigated by other descriptions of creation, in other traditions and in modern physical science?

In any description of the world’s creation, there is an implicit attempt to do two things. The first is to expand the mind’s conception: by stretching it back into the past from which the process of creation comes, and stretching it forward to the future where the ongoing process of creation leads.

As conception is thus expanded, there is also an attempt to deepen understanding: from the superficial appearance of narrow objects and events, towards underlying principles that continue through apparent differences. This continuity of underlying principle is the unifying basis on which different objects and events are related together. It is therefore implied wherever conception is expanded from limited perceptions of particular objects and events, towards a broader consideration of creation and existence as a whole.

In the Upanishads, the concept of ‘brahman’ implies both the above aspects: on the one hand, of expanding conception towards the totality of existence; and on the other hand, of deepening understanding towards underlying principle. The word ‘brahman’ means literally ‘growth’ or ‘expansion’ (from the verbal root ‘brih’ meaning ‘to increase’). Its early use in the Vedas is to describe the outpouring of spiritual power in the chanting of sacred words and the performance of sacred rituals. Subsequently, through the mythical conception of creation as a macrocosmic sacrifice, the use of the word ‘brahman’ developed a more universal sense. As finally used in the Upanishads, it describes on the one hand the entire reality of all creation; and on the other hand, it describes the underlying principle of reality that is
always fully present everywhere: in each object and each event, at each locality of space and time.

Thus, the word ‘brahman’ can be translated as ‘complete reality’, to which nothing remains to be added by further perception. And it can also be translated as ‘the absolute’, which is the essence of pure being underlying all appearances produced by the partial perceptions of body, senses and mind.

In all the apparent objects and events that are perceived by body, senses and mind, there is a mixture of superficial appearance and underlying reality. The superficialities of appearance are produced by partial and distorted perception, which must somehow be questioned and corrected, as knowledge proceeds towards truth. By seeing through all such obscuring partialities and distortions, knowledge penetrates towards underlying reality: which is pure being in itself, quite independent of perceived appearances.

One way of approaching this underlying reality is to ask how the perceived universe is created. In particular: from what does creation arise? On what does creation depend? And what becomes of created things as they pass away and lose their manifest identity?

A little reflection will show that the arising of creation is understood in two senses. On the one hand, it is conceived as a temporal process: which arises from a beginning, continues on through time and comes to an end. But, on the other hand, this temporal conception also describes an order of logical priority: where all perceived objects and events arise from an implied and thus logically prior principle of underlying reality.

Whatever objects are perceived to exist, and whatever events are perceived to take place, this implied principle of reality is the basis on which we conceive their creation, their continued existence or occurrence, and their changing and passing away.

In the unmanifest state when nothing appears, before the creation of appearances, this logically prior principle of reality must be there on its own: unmixed with any apparent objects or events. It is also there during the process of creation: underlying all the manifestations of creation, as they take place in the course of time. And it is there on its own once again in the unmanifest state of experience that occurs just after one object of attention has passed out of experience, and before attention turns to some other object.

Both these senses, of temporal process and logical priority, can be seen in the following passage from the Taittiriya Upanishad. Here, the word ‘brahman’ is translated as ‘all reality’.

**Creation**
From 3.1

... ‘Truly, that from which these beings are born, that by which born beings live, that into which those who depart dissolve, ‘that you must seek to know.

‘That is all reality.’...

Cosmology and experience

If the same principle of complete reality is conceived to be present everywhere, then it must underlie not only the macrocosm of the external universe but also each microcosm of individual experience. Accordingly, the creation of objective phenomena in the external universe and the creation of subjective appearances in individual experience must both finally arise from this same underlying reality.

In the following passage from the Chândogya Upanishad (3.14.1-4), it is shown that the whole reality of the entire world may be approached subjectively: as the underlying basis from which appearances of perception, thought and feeling arise, in each individual person’s experience.

First (in 3.14.1), there is a definition of reality (brahman) as ‘tajjalân’. This is a compressed formula which is explained (in the commentary of Shri Shankara) as made up of the four syllables ‘tat’, ‘ja’, ‘la’ and ‘an’. ‘Tat’ means ‘that’, and it represents underlying reality. ‘Ja’ is short for ‘janman’, meaning ‘birth’; ‘la’ is short for ‘laya’, meaning ‘dissolution’; and ‘an’ is short for ‘ana’, meaning ‘breathing’ or ‘living’. Thus, the formula ‘tajjalân’ may be interpreted to define reality as that which underlies birth, dissolution and living on.

Next, the passage turns to personality; and (in 3.14.2) the self is defined as ‘bhârûpa’ and ‘âkâshâtman’. By the description ‘bhârûpa’ (literally ‘that whose form is light’), the true nature of self is identified as consciousness, which illuminates all appearances in each person’s experience. In the de-
scription ‘ākāshātman’, the word ‘ākāsha’ (meaning ‘ether’ or ‘space’ or ‘sky’) implies a sense of pervasiveness and continuity through all experience: thus indicating that the self (ātman) is not a particular body, nor a particular mind, nor a particular set of senses, nor any conditioned faculty that is limited to a particular personality in some particular locality of space and time. Taken together, these two descriptions define the self as pure, unconditioned consciousness at the background of experience: which continues unchanged through all the changing actions, perceptions, thoughts and feelings of physical, sensual and mental personality.

Finally (in 3.14.3-4), this changeless self within the heart of each personality is identified as ‘all reality’ (‘brahman’), which includes the entire universe.

Translation (from the Chāndogya Upanishad) 
Retelling (from FTU, pages 104-106)

3.14.1
In truth, all this is complete reality.

[It is] that:
in birth,
in dissolution,
in living on.

Thus should the tranquil [mind] reflect [on it].

And further, there is personality, which consists of purpose and intention.

As is intention in this world, a person thus becomes: on leaving here becomes.

In truth, this many seeming world is only one reality, in which all things seem to be born, seem to live on and pass away.

For those who look, in tranquil peace, where all appearances arise, where all appearances are based, and where they all dissolve again, truth shines in all its clarity.

Each personality is made of inclinations, good and bad. Each person’s inclinations now build future personality.

By choosing to incline this way or that, each one of us builds up what later on our lives will be.
Let him determine purpose and intention.

3.14.2

Approached through mind,
embodied by the breath of life,
appearing in the forms of light,
conceived as truth,
is the self at the background of experience: continuing through space and time,
in all actions, in all desires, in all odours, in all tastes, pervading all this [world], unspeaking, unconcerned.

Through all the changes of our lives, in every personality, each one of us experiences a sense of self, that each calls 'I'.

It is the knowing principle within our minds, the principle of life within all living things, the principle of consciousness that lights up all appearances.

In all conceptions it is truth: the background of reality in all the things we seem to see.

It is the ground on which we stand, the ground of all created things we see or hear, conceive or feel. It is the basis of all sense, all thought, all sensibility.

Beyond all partial, bounded forms by which it seems to be expressed, beyond all troubles of the mind and body in this seeming world, self is untroubled, always free.

3.14.3

This is my self within the heart, tinier than a grain of rice or barley, or than a mustard seed, or than a millet grain, or than the kernel of a millet grain.

This self within each person's heart ... is smaller than the smallest thing that eyes can see or mind conceive ...
This is my self
within the heart,
greater than the earth,
greater than air and sky,
greater than heaven,
greater than these worlds.

is greater than the whole wide earth
beneath our feet; is greater than
the sky’s expanse above our heads,

than any far-flung universe
that instruments can show to us,

than all the complex, subtle worlds
imagination can conceive.

3.14.4

In all actions,
in all desires,
in all odours,
in all tastes,
pervading all
this [world],
unspeaking,
unconcerned,
this is my self
within the heart;
this is all reality.

In truth, this self within each heart
is absolute reality:
found everywhere, in everything,
beyond all things that seem to be.

Where outside things have been perceived
through body’s senses or through mind,
perception introduces doubt
that mind or body may be wrong.

But where the world’s appearances
are left behind and self is found,
there self directly knows itself.

It knows because it is itself,
and thus no room remains for doubt.

Whoever realizes self
knows finally, beyond all doubt,
unbounded, deathless certainty.

Creation from self

If each person’s true self is identical with complete reality, then it must be possible to understand this inner core of self as the underlying source of all creation. Such an approach is described in the Brihadåra¾yaka Upanishad, 2.1.20.
Translation (from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad)

2.1.20

‘As a spider issues forth with thread,

so too, from this self are issued forth all living energies, all worlds, all gods, all created beings.

Of that, the final teaching is said to be “the truth of truth”.

[“Beneath appearances or seeming world], living energies are truth. Of them, this is the truth.”

Retelling (from FTU, page 65)

2.1.20

‘As a spider from its body sends out threads and weaves a web, or as small sparks come forth from fire;

so too, from this same self come forth all energies, all lives, all worlds, all gods and all created things.

This is that final teaching which is said to be the “truth of truth”.

Truth is all things; and of all things, self is the truth of each.’

The seed of creation

Each person’s body, senses and mind are only a very small part of a much larger universe. How then could anyone find, within this little personality, a self which is all the reality that underlies the entire vastness of the perceived universe? An answer is given in the Chāndogya Upanishad, 6.12.1-3: where the apparent immensity of the entire universe is conceived to rise from inner self just as a great tree may arise from the unseen essence of fertility within a tiny seed.

In the retelling reproduced below, the original passage is modified by adding a short interpolation that introduces the concept of consciousness, in order to make the meaning a little clearer and more specific for a modern reader. Though this concept of consciousness does not occur directly in the original passage, it is indirectly implied by the word ‘aṇīmaṇa’: which occurs three times. The direct meaning of ‘aṇīmaṇa’ is ‘minuteness’ or ‘subtlety’, but it comes from the verbal root ‘aṇ’, meaning ‘to sound’ or ‘to breathe’ or ‘to
live’. As this derivation shows, the word does not refer only to minuteness of physical size, but also to subtlety of meaning and life and spirit. It may be of interest to note here that the Sanskrit roots ‘aṇḍa’ and ‘aṇ’ are cognate with the Latin ‘anima’, meaning ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’, and ‘animus’, meaning ‘mind’ or ‘thinking principle’.

Translation (from the Chāndogya Upanishad)  
Retelling (from FTU, page 114)

6.12.1
‘Bring a fruit from this nyagrodha tree.’
‘Here, Sir.’
‘Break it.’
‘It is broken, Sir.’
‘What do you see in it?’
‘These seeds, Sir, like tiny particles.’
‘Well, break one of them.’
‘It is broken, Sir.’
‘What do you see in it?’
‘Nothing at all, Sir.’

6.12.2
[Shvetaketu’s father] said to him:
‘Truly, dear son, this minuteness which you do not see,
‘truly, dear son, of this minuteness the great nyagrodha tree thus stands.

Then, Shvetaketu’s father led him to a spreading banyan tree, whose fruits had fallen on the ground.

‘Pick up a fruit…. Break it open…. Tell me what you see.’ ‘Tiny seeds.’

‘Break one of these…. What do you see?’
‘Nothing. The seeds are much too small.’

‘And yet, within each tiny seed, there is a subtle something which your eyes don’t see, something unseen from which this spreading tree has grown.’
‘Be sure of this, dear son.

**Explanatory interpolation**

‘So too, from unmixed consciousness, which mind and senses can’t perceive, arises this great-seeming world.

**From 6.12.3**

‘That which is this minuteness is that “this-itself”-ness which is all this [world].

‘That is truth. That is self.

‘Shvetaketu, you are that.’…

**Light from the seed**

The following passage from the Chåndogya Upanishad (3.17.7) shows further the intimate and subtle connection that was conceived in the Upanishads between consciousness and the primal seed of creation.

**Translation (from the Chåndogya Upanishad)**

3.17.7

Looking up from darkness, we perceive all around our own higher light, coming from the primal seed.

**Retelling (from FTU, page 107)**

Self is the ancient, timeless seed from which all life and world are born. Through all that seems obscurity, self shines undimmed as consciousness, the light that lights all other lights.

*That light is self, and self alone.*
And we have gone
to the sun:
the higher god
among the gods,
the highest light,
the highest light.

The basis of experience

In the following passage from the Muṇḍaka Upanishad (1.1.3-9), an enquiry is made into the underlying basis of all experience. And the conclusion reached (in 1.1.9) is that this underlying basis is consciousness, from which arises all apparent existence of name, form and matter.

Here, the retelling has been derived by adding in an explanatory introduction, and by elaborating the compressed ideas of the original passage with a fair degree of interpretation and explanation.

• The introduction is meant to explain the concept of reality that is implied by Shaunaka’s somewhat cryptic question: ‘What is it that being known, all this becomes known?’

• The rest of the retelling elaborates ideas in a way that somewhat modifies the original passage. In particular, the concept of consciousness is brought in rather earlier than in the original, where consciousness is explicitly described only at the end (in 1.1.9): by the three phrases ‘sarvajnyah’ (translated below as ‘that which knows in all experience’), ‘sarvavid’ (translated below as ‘that which knows all that is known’) and ‘yasya jñānamayam tapah’ (translated below as that ‘whose intensity consists of knowledge’).

Translation (from the Muṇḍaka Upanishad) Retelling (from FTU, pages 184-188)

Explanatory introduction added into retelling

The great householder Shaunaka
was blessed with an enquiring mind,
unsatisfied by partial truth.

He thought: ‘In this vast universe,
there are so many different things
our minds and senses seem to see.'
'In each perception we perceive,  
so little of the world seems shown.

'As mind and sense perceive the world  
they show us small appearances,  
which change from changing points of view.

'A mountain seen from far seems small;  
from closer up it grows in size.

'A person on the lower slopes  
sees grass and trees, hears rustling leaves,  
smells flowers, feels the warmth of sun;  

'but higher up stark cliffs appear,  
with craggy shapes of barren rock,  
and eerie sounds of rushing wind,  
and scentless feel of chilly air.

'And yet, these different seeming things  
are varying appearances  
through which one mountain can be known.

'So too, in all experience,  
the many things we seem to see  
are differing appearances  
through which we know one universe.

'What is this one same universe  
in which our minds and senses see  
so many different seeming things?

'Is there some way to understand  
this one complete reality  
we know through all appearances  
of everything that seems to be?'

1.1.3

The great householder  
Shaunaka duly  
approached Angiras,  
and asked:

So Shaunaka, with due respect,  
approached the teacher Angiras  
and asked: ‘Can knowledge of the world’s  
reality be so complete  
that all the many things we seem  
to see are understood in it?
'Sir, what is it that being known all this [apparent universe] becomes known?'

1.1.4-5

To Shaunaka, Angiras said:

'Those who know complete reality say that there are two kinds of knowledge to be known:

'the higher and the lower.'

'Among the lower of these are:

'the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Såma Veda, the Atharva Veda, phonetics, ritual, grammar, etymology, metrics, astrology.'

'And the higher is that by which the unchanging is attained.'

1.1.6

'That which can’t be seen or grasped,

'Can something so complete be found that knowing it knows everything?'

'The truth you seek,' said Angiras, 'is plain to see, and can be found by anyone who wishes it.

'To know it you must go beyond all scriptures, sciences and arts: for these are mere constructions, made by partial body, sense and mind.

'Beneath all learned structures, built of form and name and quality, upon what basis do we join the partial views of sense and mind, to make our knowledge more complete?

'This basis must be firm. It must remain: while mind and body change, and changing views give rise to sights, sensations, feelings, thoughts that come and go in our experience.

'It is no object seen by mind and sense; for all such objects come into experience when they are seen, and go away again as our attention turns elsewhere.'
‘Unseen by sense, unseen by mind,
it is the knowing basis which
must carry on, continuing
through changing sense and changing mind,
as seeming objects come and go.

‘It is not body, sense or mind,
for these are merely instruments
of change and action in the world.

‘It is no object that can act
on other objects; nor can it
be acted on, by anything.

‘which has
no family, no class,
no eyes or ears,
no hands or feet,

‘It has no family, nor class;
nor has it eyes that see, nor ears
that hear, nor hands that touch or hold,
nor feet that stand or walk or run.

‘It does not act; it only knows.

‘It is pure consciousness: which lights
up all appearances that come
and go in our experience.

‘which is constant
and continual
‘All space, all time, all difference,
all change are known by consciousness.
Thus space and time and difference
and change cannot apply to it.

‘in different
happenings,

‘It is the undivided base
from which divided space is known,
the unity in difference,
the changeless continuity
which knows all change and passing time.

‘extending everywhere,

‘It’s always here, in every one
of us, each moment that we know;

‘whatever we may seem to know,
whatever it may seem we do
not know, or only know in part.
Creation

Upon this base of consciousness, all objects are perceived and thus are manifested in the world.

In consciousness, all seeming things arise, exist and come to end.

‘completely subtle;
‘that is the changeless source of being which the wise and steadfast see.

‘Beneath gross things of outer sense, beneath all subtleties of mind, it is creation’s changeless source:
‘from which all seeming things come forth, on which each seeming thing depends, to which each thing returns again.

1.1.7

‘As a spider issues [thread] and takes [it] in,
‘as plants grow on the earth,
‘as hair from a living person’s head and body;
‘so too, from the unchanging, everything arises here.

As from a spider thread comes forth and is drawn in, or just as plants grow out of earth and when they die dissolve in earth again; so too all things that we perceive, throughout the manifested universe,

‘arise from changeless consciousness, are manifest as consciousness taking on apparent form, and when they end are shown dissolved as nothing else but consciousness.

1.1.8-9

‘Through purposeful intensity, reality becomes constructed
‘[as a seeming universe made up of seeming things].

‘Each moment of experience, a person’s mind and sense perceive a partial view that seems to show some object in the universe.

‘At different times, through different minds, through different capabilities of sense, we seem to see a vast variety of different things.
'And thus it seems that we perceive
a universe of vast extent,
containing more complexity
than sense or mind can comprehend.

‘From that
food is born.

‘In this vast-seeming universe,
our little senses only see
small objects, each a little piece
of matter formed in space and time.

‘From food,
living energy,

‘When objects interact, we see
the energy that they exchange;
and thus material things seem formed
of subtle energy that flows,
through space and time, to manifest
the outward world our senses see.

‘If outward things are seen as forms
of manifesting energy,
then what is thus made manifest?

‘What do forms mean? How can they be interpreted, to understand
more than our senses seem to see?

‘mind,
truth;

‘Forms are interpreted by mind:
which is expressed in forms,
and which reflects within itself
to ask for truth that forms express.

‘worlds,
and in actions
the deathless.

‘Where mind turns back towards its source,
it is dissolved in consciousness;
which has no parts, nor suffers change.

‘That which knows
in all experience,
‘and which knows
all that is known,
‘whose intensity
consists of knowledge;

‘There, partiality and change
do not apply; and thus complete,
undying truth is realized.

‘But where the mind is turned towards
an outer world of seeming things,
there only partial truths are seen,
expressed by mind in outward acts....’
Creation through personality

In an extended passage from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad (1.4), creation is described as arising, from underlying self, through personality. This passage has two aspects: mythical and philosophical.

The mythical aspect describes creation as an event that took place in the far distant past, at the beginning of time. Here, the universe is mythically conceived to have arisen from an absolute self which existed on its own before the creation of time; and which continues to exist unchanged, underlying the apparent universe, as created time proceeds.

The philosophical aspect uses this creation myth to explain and investigate experience, as it is known in the present. Here, each person’s experience is described as arising from a common, underlying principle of self: which is to be identified through the statement ‘aham brahmāsmi’ (‘I am the absolute’ or ‘I am complete reality’).

In the following translation and retelling (as elsewhere in this book), it is the philosophical aspect that has been emphasized. The translation is fairly literal, but it omits some sections of the original that are too elaborately mythological. And where a word or phrase may be translated in differing ways, the more philosophical alternative has been chosen. In particular, the word ‘agre’ (which occurs several times in the original passage) has been translated as ‘first and foremost’, instead of the more usual and more mythological translation ‘in the beginning’.

In the retelling, the philosophical aspect is further emphasized, by replacing the past tense of mythical imagination with a present tense of philosophical reflection. Thus, the mythological parts of the original have been modified, through a replacement of mythical metaphor by philosophical interpretation.

Translation (from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)  Retelling
(from FTU, pages 44-50)

1.4.1

First and foremost, self alone was this: Right from the start, each person’s self is common, plain humanity:
which is established as purusha [the common, underlying principle of ‘human-ness’ in every person].

He looked, and saw nothing else but self.

He first declared: ‘I am.’

Thus, he came to be called ‘I’.

And therefore even now, one who is addressed says first just ‘It is I’;

and then speaks another name, which becomes his.

He who came first, before all this, burned up all ills.

Therefore he is purusha [plain, simple ‘human-ness’].

One who knows thus, truly burns up that which seeks to come before this ['human-ness'].

which different-seeming persons share through changing times and changing minds in different personalities.

Whatever sights a person sees, whatever may appear to mind, in all of our experiences, the self is always present there.

Thus nothing ever is perceived without the presence of the self. And nothing anyone perceives can ever be apart from self.

First and foremost, every person starts by thinking: ‘This is I.’ And so each person is called ‘I’.

When asked for one’s identity, what first response comes up at once, spontaneously, from deep within?

One first identifies oneself as ‘I’, and only then come other names by which one is identified.

This, which comes first, before all things, burns up all misery and wrong. Anything that tries to push in front of plain humanity burns up, for one who knows just this.

Creation
1.4.2

He was afraid. Therefore, a person who is lonely feels afraid.

He himself made this observation:

‘Since there is nothing else but me, of what then am I afraid?’

From that alone his fear departed.

For, of what should one be afraid? It’s only from a second thing that fear arises.

But people seem to have known fear: a lonely person feels afraid.

When such a person, all alone, observes ‘Of what am I afraid, if there is nothing else but I?’; then with this thought fear vanishes.

Without a second thing to fear, what is there to be frightened of?

1.4.3

But still, he was not pleased. Therefore, a lonely person is not pleased.

He desired a second. He became the size of a woman and man in close embrace.

This very self he caused to fall divided into two.

From that, husband and wife came into being.

And people also seem to feel unhappiness: a lonely person suffers want of warmth and joy.

By longing for companionship, life in this world has taken shape as male and female intertwined.

The self has thus been made to seem divided, fallen into two, as male and female have been formed: each one an uncompleted half.
Therefore, this personality is a half-fragment of oneself.

This is just what Yājñavalkya truly said.

Therefore, this space is just filled by a woman. With her, he came together. From that, human beings were born.

1.4.5

He knew: I myself am creation; for I created all this.’ Hence he became creation.

The knowing self in each of us is underlying consciousness from which appearances arise in everyone’s experience.

Since everything comes out of it, it’s that which seems to have become this many seeming universe. It’s all creation in itself.

One who knows thus comes to be at this very creation of his.

To know it is to stand as self, which one has truly always been, at all creation’s timeless source.

1.4.7

That itself was this, at that time unmanifest.

The world we see is only this: which is itself unmanifest.

That, by mere name and form, was manifested:

Only by name and form has this seemed to be manifest, as world.
[conceived] as something with that name or with this form.

That is this, even now, by mere name and form made manifest:

[conceived] as something with that name or with this form.

He is this, pervading here [in the body], up to the tip of [a person’s] nails:

just as a blade is placed within its sheath, or as all-sustaining [fire] in its all-sustaining web.

Him they do not perceive, for [as perceived] he is incomplete.

Merely breathing, he gets to be called ‘breath’;

speaking, [he is called] ‘speech’;
seeing, [he is] ‘sense of sight’;

hearing, [he is] ‘sense of sound’;
thinking, [he is called] ‘mind’.

These are only names of functions of his.

The world seems manifested when some seeming name is used for this, some seeming form is seen in this.

This is that common principle which permeates the universe into each corner of the world;

just as a blade fits in its sheath, or as the energy which forms the universe lies there within all matter that is formed by it.

This universal principle cannot be known through force or power of life’s intentions, nor through speech, nor sight, nor hearing, nor through mind.

These are merely names of functions: each of which is incomplete.
Whoever thus pays heed to each, one by one, does not know; for thus [appearing] through each [function], one by one, this [appearance] becomes incomplete.

One should heed him only as that which is called ‘self’; for, in it, all these [appearances] turn out to be one. That is this, to be attained: that which is this self of all of this. For, by this [self], one knows all this.

Just as [a tracker finds] by footprints, one may find. Who knows this finds praise and poetry. 1.4.8

That is this, dearer than a son, dearer than wealth and property, dearer than all else, deepest within, that which is this self. Looking through such partial functions, all that’s seen is incomplete.

Such means can never quite know truth.

Reflecting on the self alone, all partial functions merge in one. In all the world that we perceive, this self is what we need to reach: for everything is known by this.

True honour, glory, grace, success arise unasked for one who knows all things as signs of only this.

Beyond all else, it is the self that’s near and dear: more than all wealth, more than all friends and family.
Of him who speaks of something other than the self as dear, one may say:

‘He will lose what he holds dear’; for it may very well be so.

One should heed only the self as dear.

For one who heeds only the self as dear, that which is dear is indestructible.

When anything besides this self is thought an object of desire, then desire turns to torment: even desire for God himself.

In any object of desire, self is all we wish to find.

Where self is truly seen in love, there love is found to be complete, for what is loved can never end.

It is said:

‘Given that men think of becoming everything through knowledge of the absolute;

‘what did it know, that absolute, from which it became everything?’

By knowledge of the absolute, a person hopes to be complete.

This absolute we thus invoke, what does it know, as it creates from its own self the world we see?

First and foremost, this [universe] was the absolute itself.

It knew itself: ‘I am the absolute.’

The absolute is only this, which first and foremost knows itself.

And on this base appear from it the many things we seem to see.
Among the gods, whoever recognized it became it.

So also among seers. So also among men.

Seeing that in truth as this, the seer Vāmadeva reflected: ‘I am Manu [first of men]. I am the sun.’

That is this, even now. One who thus knows, ‘I am the absolute’, becomes all this.

Even the gods themselves have not the power for his undoing; for he becomes their self. The gods themselves cannot undo one who has found identity with that which is their very self.

But one who heeds an alien deity, thinking ‘That is different, I am different’; he does not know. But if one heeds an alien god who seems apart from one’s own self, truth can’t be known; for then one is a beast of burden to the gods.

He is like a mere beast of the gods.

Just as many beasts may serve a man, thus each man serves the gods. As beasts of burden have their masters, so do people have their gods.

If just one beast is led astray, it is not liked. It is not liked when any beast is taken from its master’s fold.

What then, of many? Nor is it liked when someone finds this truth: that in each one of us the self is absolute, and free.
Therefore, it is not liked by these [gods] that men should know this [self].

1.4.15

That is this:

the brāhmaṇa [the man of knowledge],

the kshatriya [the man of power],

the vaishya [the man of commerce]

the śūdra [the man of service].

That, through fire alone has come to be:

the [sacred] absolute [worshipped] in the gods,
the man of knowledge among men.

[That] through power has come to be:
the man of power;
through commerce, the man of commerce;
through service, the man of service.

Therefore, people seek the world: through fire alone among the gods, in the man of knowledge among men.

For, by these two forms, the absolute has become [manifest].

It is this absolute that seems to have evolved, through course of time, as knowledge, power, enterprise and service, in society.

We dream of gods to seek out worlds of sublimated energy; and in our waking life we seek out knowledge of our universe.

For energy and learning are both forms in which the absolute has been expressed in what we see.
But, whoever leaves this world, without seeing his own place; [for him it is] unknown.

He does not take possession of it, just like the Vedas not recited or other work not done.

Whoever, here, not knowing thus, does work even of great value;

that same [achievement] of his, in the end, must be exhausted.

The self alone should be heeded as [all] the world.

One who heeds the self alone as all the world, his achievement is never exhausted.

For, from this same self is created whatever is desired.

But, if one only sees the self absolute in all existence, life’s reward can never die.

Everything that is desired is produced from this same self.

1.4.16

In truth, this self is the world of all beings.

The world of beings is this self.

It, through that which worships and sacrifices, is the world of gods.

It is the mythic world of gods created by religious rite.
Likewise, through that which recites, [it is] the visionaries’ [world].

And, through that which offers to ancestors and desires progeny, [it is] the ancestors’ [world].

And, through that which shelters humans and nourishes them, [it is the world] of human beings.

And, through that which obtains for animals grass and water, [it is the world] of animals.

Through that on which, in homes of this, wild beasts and birds [and other creatures] even to the ants subsist, [it is] their world.

As one may wish no harm of one’s own world, so too all creatures wish no harm, to one who knows thus.

That, in truth, is what is known, what is sought to be known.

It is the fancied world of thought created by an author’s words.

It is the world tradition makes respecting past experience and also seeking something new.

It is the world we humans make from need for home and sustenance.

It is the world of animals, where grass and water must be found.

It is the earth on which subsist beasts, birds and other forms of life, in bodies that are homes of this.

One should wish well of one’s own world. At heart, all beings do wish well, seen in that light which knows just this.

Whatever anyone has known, whatever anyone has sought to know, is nothing else but this.
1.4.17

First and foremost, self alone was this, one alone.

He desired: ‘May there be a wife for me. And, may I have progeny. And, may there be wealth for me. And, may I do [my] work.’

Just this much is desire. Not even one who wishes to can find [by wishing] more than this.

Therefore, even now, a lonely person desires: ‘May there be a wife for me. And, may I have progeny. And, may there be wealth for me. And, may I do [my] work.’

So far as he does not obtain any one of these, to that extent he feels merely incomplete.

But, [examined] further, completeness is his.

In truth, there is one single self, with nothing else at all besides.

And yet, it seems that people seek out company of other selves, that people feel desire for birth and property and gainful work.

Such limited desires can’t grow to be more than limited, not even if one wants them to.

A lonely person wants to find companionship, wants a new life, wants things and looks for work to do.

And where such wishes aren’t fulfilled, a person does not feel complete.

How can a person be complete?
[Pure consciousness of] mind alone is his self.

Speech is the wife [that brings forth his progeny].

Sight is [his] human wealth, for by sight he knows it.

Hearing is his divine wealth, for by hearing he hears it.

Self alone is his work, for by the self he does work.

He is this: fivefold sacrifice, fivefold animal, fivefold ‘human-ness’.

Fivefold is this: all this whatsoever. That is this.

Who knows thus attains everything.

Through consciousness that’s known as self; through speech that’s married to the self; through purpose as its progeny.

Through property that, known by sight, is known as nothing else but sight; through worth that, known by sense, is known as only sensibility.

Through work that shows true purity of self, on which all life depends.

In all the multiplicity of actions, persons, creatures, things, throughout this many-seeming world, the self is one and one alone.

Waking from deep sleep

How do we experience the creation of the perceived world from inner self? An answer is given in the following passage from the Kaushitaki Upanishad (4.19-20). Here, deep sleep is understood as a state of pure consciousness, unmixed with any appearances of an outside world. Hence, on waking from deep sleep, a person experiences a creation of the apparent world, through waking mind and senses, from underlying consciousness.

This underlying consciousness is the true nature of self. It shines by itself in deep sleep; and it continues unchanged through the dream and waking states: as the ultimate, illuminating basis of all appearances in the dream and waking worlds.
**Translation** (from the Kaushitaki Upanishad)  

**Retelling** (from FTU, pages 159-161)

**From 4.19**

... In depth of sleep no dreams are seen.

In depth of sleep, no mind appears conceiving different seeming things; and mind’s attention does not direct living energy from consciousness to different seeming objects in some world that mind conceives.

Thus here, in dreamless sleep, all outward-seeming energies of life have been withdrawn, and differences are all dissolved in consciousness: which shines alone, by its own light, unmixed with any seeming thing.

**4.20**

Then, in this very living breath, oneness is attained.

Into that which is this:

- goes speech together with all words,
- goes seeing together with all sights,
- goes hearing together with all sounds,
- goes mind together with all thoughts.

Here, every day, unnoticed in the simple peace of dreamless sleep, all life attains to unity of underlying consciousness, from which all lives and minds arise.

Whenever someone falls asleep, attention is drawn in: from world of waking sense, through dreaming mind, to unconditioned consciousness, which shines unmixed in depth of sleep.

All speech, all words and all they mean, all seeing, hearing, sights and sounds, and all perceptions, thoughts and feelings then dissolve: absorbed again into their underlying base of consciousness, from which they rise.
When one awakes, just as from burning fire sparks come forth in all directions, so too, from this self, living breaths come forth each to its place; from living breaths, the senses; from the senses, worlds.

This living breath in itself is the self of consciousness: which has pervaded this [seeming] self of body, right to the hairs and nails.

But, when a person wakes from sleep, outgoing energies of life appear, through various faculties of mind and personality.

As sparks come forth from blazing fire, so too from consciousness come forth the various energies of life that mind and personality disperse through their activities.

From these activities arise appearances of mind and sense; and thus, from these appearances, the worlds that we perceive are born.

This living breath in itself is the self of consciousness: which has pervaded this [seeming] self of body, right to the hairs and nails.

Beneath appearances of world perceived by senses and by mind, consciousness continues on through every moment of experience: lighting all appearances that rise in dream or waking state; and shining self-illuminated, on its own, in depth of sleep.

It is each person’s real self: the inner principle of life that is expressed in every act of mind and body in the world.

That is this self, on which these [seeming] selves depend: All seeming selves, of body or of sense or mind, depend upon this real self of consciousness.
as on a chief, his own [followers depend].

Just as a chief makes use of his own [followers];

or, as to a chief his own [followers] are of use;

so too, this self of consciousness experiences [the world] through these selves;

and even so, these selves are in service to this self.

Indeed, as long as Indra [chief of gods] did not understand this self, demons overcame him.

But when he understood, he struck down and conquered the demons:

attaining pre-eminence, independence and sovereignty of all gods and all beings.

So too, one who knows thus strikes down all ills and attains pre-eminence, independence and sovereignty of all beings;

one who knows thus, one who knows thus.

Just as a chief is represented by his followers, who act with his support and for his sake;

so too, the real self is represented by the seeming selves of body, sense and mind: whose actions all depend on its support and are, unknowingly or knowingly, done only for its sake.

On consciousness, the real self, these seeming selves always depend for all they do or seek to do.

But it does not depend on them; for it is there in depth of sleep, when seeming selves have all dissolved.

As long as this true self is not correctly understood and known, a person’s actions are not firmly anchored in the changeless ground from which they come, on which they stand and where they find all that they seek.

Thus, if this ground of self remains unknown, poor body, sense and mind keep being overcome by their own demons of uncertainty and partiality and ill.

But one who knows the truth of self has reached that certain, deathless ground of unconditioned consciousness:

where ills have all been overcome and freedom has, at last, been won.
The creation of appearances

Appearances are not created only at the moment of waking from deep sleep. They go on being created at every moment of waking and dreaming experience. Thus, each person’s experience can be viewed as a stream of changing appearances: created by the perceptions, thoughts and feelings which come and go in that person’s mind. As the mind perceives and thinks and feels, it creates the succession of changing appearances that rise up from underlying consciousness, in each person’s experience.

Where modern physical cosmology is almost entirely focused upon the objective world, traditional cosmologies had a more pronounced subjective aspect. Before the development of modern telescopes and space exploration, traditional cosmology was used more for metaphorical reflection than for experimental astrophysics. In the Upanishads at least, the purpose of cosmology is clear. It is to meditate and reflect, upon the underlying reality from which the manifest universe is created.

For someone who meditates or reflects, the physical creation of the universe is not of course at hand; for it has taken place over an enormous period of time, stretching back to very remote events in the far distant past. However, what is at hand are the appearances of perception, thought and feeling: rising up and being created from underlying consciousness.

In effect, this is an immediate, mental creation of the world’s appearances, as they are manifested in an individual’s experience. Through the correspondence that was conceived between the macrocosm of the external universe and the microcosm of individual experience, traditional descriptions of cosmic creation can often be interpreted as metaphors for the creation of appearances from underlying consciousness.

In what follows, an attempt is made to interpret the Nāṣadiya hymn from the Rig Veda (10.129) in just this way. First, to give a reader some sense of the original text, a translation by A. A. Macdonell is reproduced. Then, it is shown how the text has been retold in this book, by reproducing the retelling alongside the appropriate lines (or parts of lines) from Macdonell’s translation.

---

Non-being then existed not nor being:
There was no air, nor sky that is beyond it.
What was concealed? Wherein? In whose protection?
And was there deep, unfathomable water?  1

Death then existed not nor life immortal;
Of neither night nor day was any token.
By its inherent force the One breathed windless:
No other thing than that beyond existed.  2

Darkness there was at first by darkness hidden;
Without distinctive marks, this all was water.
That which, becoming, by the void was covered,
That One by force of heat came into being.  3

Desire entered the One in the beginning:
It was the earliest seed, of thought the product.
The sages searching in their hearts with wisdom,
Found out the bond of being in non-being.  4

Their ray extended light across the darkness:
But was the One above or was it under?
Creative force was there, and fertile power:
Below was energy, above was impulse.  5

Who knows for certain? Who shall here declare it?
Whence was it born, and whence came this creation?
The gods were born after this world’s creation:
Then who can know from whence it has arisen?  6

None knoweth whence creation has arisen;
And whether he has or has not produced it:
He who surveys it in the highest heaven,
He only knows, or haply he may know not.  7
There was no air,
nor sky
that is beyond it.

What was concealed?…

… Wherein?…

… In whose protection?

1.

Non-being then existed not nor being:

Before conception has appeared, no absence can arise at all;
for objects have not been conceived that may be ‘there’ or be ‘not there’.

Nor yet can qualities arise, nor overarching principles pervading different-seeming things; for these too have not been conceived.

What is the base of consciousness from which conception must arise, before the world can be conceived?

Unmixed with seeming, doubtful things that rise from mind’s uncertainties, what does pure consciousness contain?

Where can such consciousness be found?

Whose is this unmixed consciousness?

How does its knowledge carry on, as things appear and disappear, conceived by doubtful, changing mind?

Just what provides stability, security and certainty, as consciousness continues on:
through seeming things that come and go, appearing when they are perceived and disappearing when they’re not?
And was there deep, unfathomable water? Through changing mind’s apparent waves of form and name and quality, what really is the consciousness of which each seeming wave consists, just like the boundless depths below?

2.

Death then existed not nor life immortal; Before conception rises up from unconditioned consciousness, there is no change nor difference; for time and space aren’t yet conceived.

Of neither night nor day was any token. With nothing born, there is no death and so there can’t be deathlessness.

By its inherent force the One breathed windless: Since world has not yet been conceived, there’s nothing that appears by day or disappears again at night.

No world appears as we awake, nor disappears when we’re asleep.

There is no night. There is no day. There is no waking state, nor sleep.

No other thing than that beyond existed. Within the world that mind conceives, our bodies live by breathing air. So too, our minds breathe meaning out through words and acts, and breathe back in perceptions from an outer world. But consciousness is life itself, which lives by its inherent light that lights itself, without the need for any breathing out or in.

In truth, as known by consciousness, what seems outside is known within. There really is no outside world that’s separate from some inner mind. There’s no outside and no inside.
3.

Darkness there was at first by darkness hidden;

When mind looks down to its own depths from where conception seems to rise, a blinding darkness first appears concealed in its own ignorance.

Without distinctive marks, this all was water.

Here, all seems primal, inchoate: with unseen powers surging up from depths of dark obscurity.

That which, becoming, by the void was covered,

From this uncertain, shifting base, whatever truth may be conceived comes dressed in empty vanity:

That One by force of heat came into being.

of mind that’s driven blindly on by energies and powers of will it doesn’t fully understand.

4. 2

Desire entered the One in the beginning:

Desire turns on consciousness right from the start of seeming life:

It was the earliest seed, of thought the product.

where mind is seeded by desire to form a stream of changing thoughts by which the world is then conceived.

2Stanza 4 can be translated alternatively (and fairly literally) as follows:

First of all, upon that [One]
desire has turned entirely.
This has been mind’s primal seed.
Searching heart with mind intent,
men of vision, in non-being,
have found out the bond of being.

The main difference is at the start. (a) ‘Agre’ is translated by Macdonell as ‘in the beginning’, but here above as ‘first of all’. (b) ‘Samavartatādhi’ is translated by Macdonell as ‘entered’, but here above in the more elaborate and literal sense of ‘turned entirely upon’ (‘turned’ from ‘avartata’, ‘entirely’ from ‘sam’, and ‘upon’ from ‘adhi’).
The sages searching in their hearts with wisdom, Found out the bond of being in non-being.

When thought turns back to heart within, to clarify obscurities and search for undistorted truth, at first there seems blank nothingness where everything has disappeared.

What is this seeming nothingness? It is the absence of apparent things, not of reality.

In it, all seeming thought dissolves and what remains is consciousness, unmixed with any seeming thing.

As thought dissolves, pure consciousness shines out as all reality: where different-seeming things are joined as mere appearances of one.

Unseen by body, sense or mind, the light of consciousness extends through all the universe it shows:

through everything that seems to be or not to be, through space and time, through every state of changing mind.

Where mind completely disappears, as in the peace of dreamless sleep, there comes a state that mind conceives as dark and empty nothingness.

But nothingness cannot seem dark unless it’s known by consciousness: whose light shines unconditioned here, unseen by body, sense and mind.

Back in the world that mind conceives, just where can consciousness be found?

5.

Their ray extended light across the darkness: Unseen by body, sense or mind, the light of consciousness extends through all the universe it shows:

through everything that seems to be or not to be, through space and time, through every state of changing mind.

Where mind completely disappears, as in the peace of dreamless sleep, there comes a state that mind conceives as dark and empty nothingness.

But nothingness cannot seem dark unless it’s known by consciousness: whose light shines unconditioned here, unseen by body, sense and mind.

But was the One above or was it under?
Is it beneath appearances?
Is it above what mind desires?

Creative force was there, and fertile power:
Is it the subtle seeds of mind from which creation is conceived?
Is it the energies and powers that shape the world and get things done?

Below was energy, above was impulse.
Is it the underlying power that moves creation from the start?
Is it the drive that follows on to look for better life beyond?

6.
Who knows for certain?
Who shall here declare it?

Who really knows? Just what is it in each of us that knows the things our minds conceive and senses see?

Whence was it born, and whence came this creation?

Just who or what in us can tell from where appearances are born, from where creation is conceived?

The gods were born after this world’s creation:

Our faculties of mind and sense are part of the created world. They cannot therefore come before this world has been conceived by mind.

Then who can know from whence it has arisen?

What then is prior to the mind?
Just who or what in us can know from where conception rises up to form the world we think we see?
Stanza 7 can be translated alternatively (and fairly literally) as follows:

From where has this creation come to be?
Has it been established or has it not?
Only its witness in the highest heaven
truly knows [it] or knows if [it is] not.

The main difference is in the last line. ‘Yadi’ has been translated by Macdonell as ‘haply’ (i.e. ‘perhaps’), but here above as ‘if’. Macdonell’s translation thus expresses a sense of doubt about all knowledge of the created world. This alternative translation goes on to suggest an enquiry into pure, unconditioned consciousness: whose self-illuminating knowledge continues independent of whether the created world seems to exist or not.
Change and continuity

Movement

In the first chapter of the Chåndogya Upanishad, there is a short passage (1.9.1) which asks about the nature of movement. And the answer is given that movement is really nothing but space; because all beings arise from space, come to end in space and are contained in space.

How is this passage to be interpreted? In the original Sanskrit, the word used for ‘movement’ is ‘gati’, and the word used for ‘space’ is ‘åkåsha’.

Let us first consider the Sanskrit word ‘gati’. In general, the word means ‘going’ or ‘moving’ (as an abstract noun derived from the verbal root ‘gam’, meaning ‘to go’ or ‘to move’). Based on this general meaning, the word ‘gati’ is used in many particular ways. In the sense of ‘going from’ or ‘issuing’, it can be used to mean ‘origin’ or ‘source’ or ‘basis’ or ‘essence’. In the sense of ‘going between’ or ‘proceeding’, it can be used to mean ‘process’ or ‘means’ or ‘path’ or ‘way’ or ‘state’. In the sense of ‘going to’ or ‘reaching’, it can be used to mean ‘goal’ or ‘end’ or ‘refuge’ or ‘resort’.

Accordingly, the above passage (Chåndogya Upanishad 1.9.1) can be translated in rather different ways.

S. Radhakrishnan interprets ‘gati’ as ‘goal’, in the following translation (from The Principal Upanißads):

‘What is the goal of this world?’ He replied, ‘Space, for all these creatures are produced from space. They return back into space. For space is greater than these. Space is the final goal.’

Juan Mascaró interprets ‘gati’ as ‘origin’ or ‘source’, as implied in the following translation (from The Upanishads):

Wherefrom do all these worlds come? They come from space. All beings arise from space, and into space they return: space is indeed their beginning, and space is their final end.

Swåmi Swåhånanda (in The Chåndogya Upaniṣad ) interprets ‘gati’ as ‘essence’:
'What is the essence of this world?' Ākāśa,' said (Pravāhaṇa); ‘all these beings arise from Ākāśa alone and are finally dissolved into Ākāśa; because Ākāśa alone is greater than all these and Ākāśa is the support at all times.’

And further, by interpreting ‘gati’ more simply and directly as ‘going’ or ‘movement’, the same passage could also be translated:

‘What is the movement of this world?’
‘It is space,’ he said. ‘All these beings rise produced from space alone and, given up, return to space. For space is greater than they are. Space is what carries on, beyond.’

This last translation is a little elaborated in the retelling reproduced below (from FTU, page 101):

What is this change and movement that appears to form our world?

All seeming motion is but space; for everything is formed in space. When formed, each thing is part of space; whatever moves, must move in space. Contained in space, all forms arise and move and change and pass away. All moving things and changing forms arise, take shape, continue on and come to end in space alone.

The continuing background

What is the meaning of the Sanskrit word ākāśha’, which has been translated above as ‘space’?

The word ‘ākāśha’ can also be translated as ‘ether’ or ‘sky’. Its translation as ‘ether’ shows that it refers to the continuity of space. As ‘ether’, ‘ākāśha’ was taken to be an all-pervasive substance which is present everywhere, unconfined and unlimited by the boundaries of any locality in space or time. This ‘ether’ is not a gross material substance which is somehow separated into pieces, so as to form the bounded objects that our limited senses per-
ceive. It is too subtle to be perceived by any of the senses, because they are all limited instruments whose range of perception is always confined within the boundaries of particular localities. Unseen by the senses, the ‘ether’ is known only by its continuity: as the continuing background of space and time, in which each particular object is located.

Accordingly, the word ‘ākāsha’ does not refer to ‘space’ in the narrow sense: as distance and locality, which separate particular objects. In Sanskrit, when space is conceived in this narrow sense, it is described by the words ‘dik’ (literally ‘direction’, ‘quarter’) and ‘desha’ (literally ‘place’, ‘region’). By contrast, the word ‘ākāsha’ conceives of ‘space’ in a much broader and more universal sense: as continuing space and time, which together contain the entire universe and which thus connect different objects. In this conception, all of space and time are taken together: as the pervasive and unifying background of the world, in which each physical and mental thing must be located.

This is why the word ‘ākāsha’ is also used to mean ‘sky’. For the sky was taken to be a continuing, universal background: overarching all particular things on earth. Accordingly, it was a cosmic symbol for the continuing background of experience that enables particular objects to be contrasted or compared, and hence to be distinguished apart or related together.

There is a striking correspondence here with modern physics. At the end of the nineteenth century, light was thought to travel as a wave motion in a highly pervasive material medium called ‘ether’. This ‘ether’ somehow pervaded other substances like glass and water and air: thus enabling light to be transmitted through them. But it was much more rarefied than other substances, because it somehow filled empty space: thus enabling light to be transmitted through a vacuum tube from which the air has been pumped out; and enabling light to be transmitted from the sun and the stars to the earth, though the vast empty spaces that are seen in the sky.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein put forward the theory of relativity: which thinks of light as transmitted by the innate properties of space and time. In this theory, the transmission of light and other phenomena, such as gravity, are conceived to manifest the underlying ‘geometry’ of space and time. This ‘space-time geometry’ is simply the way in which apparently different events are connected together, in a ‘space-time continuum’.

Here, light is no longer thought to be transmitted through a material medium that must be added on to space and time, as something extra to them. Instead, light is transmitted, and other phenomena are manifested, by the ‘space-time continuum’ itself. The so-called ‘ether’ is nothing else but the continuity of space and time.
This new way of looking at the ‘ether’ went along with a broader and more fundamental change in the way that physicists conceive the world. The theory of relativity does not think about the world as a mechanical system of pieces of matter that are extraneously added on to space and time. Instead, it has been developing a conception of the entire physical universe as a ‘space-time continuum’: where space, time, matter and energy are essentially inter-related and must be considered together; in order to understand an invariant and continuing reality beneath the variations and changes of relative appearance.

In much the same way, though generalizing their approach to consider mental as well as physical experience, the Upanishads conceive of ‘ākāsha’ as the background continuity of space and time; and they enquire into an unchanging reality that underlies this continuity.

In the following translation and retelling of a passage from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad (3.8.3-11), the word ‘ākāsha’ is translated as ‘ether’.

**Translation (from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad)**

3.8.3

She said: ‘Yājnyavalkya, ‘that which is above heaven, ‘that which is below earth, ‘that which is between these two, heaven and earth; `that which was, and is, and is to be; ‘that which is thus spoken of, in what is that woven, warp and woof?’

**Retelling (from FTU, pages 74-76)**

‘Yājnyavalkya … What is the substance of all that is said to be existence: above heaven, below earth, in earth and heaven and in between, in all that was and is and is to be?’
3.8.4

He said: ‘Gārgi,
‘that which is above heaven,
‘that which is below earth,
‘that which is between these two, heaven and earth;
‘that which was, and is, and is to be;
‘that which is thus spoken of, is woven, warp and woof, in ether.’

‘This all-pervasive substance is called “ether”. It is not a gross substance, like “earth”, which can be fashioned into separate objects, as a potter fashions clay into pots. Instead, this “ether” is the highly subtle substance of underlying continuity: which enables each object or event to be understood, in relation to other objects and events located elsewhere in space and time.

‘Through the limited perceptions of body, senses and mind, limited objects and events appear at the forefront of attention. Each particular object or event is thus a limited and partial appearance of a much larger world. Each such limited appearance, of only one particular object or event, is understood in relation to a background of experience which somehow comprehends other objects and events that are not explicitly seen or thought of at the time.

‘As attention turns from one appearance to another, the background of experience continues, enabling different appearances and different objects and events to be related. In every object or event that appears in experience, this continuing background is understood. Its continuity thus extends throughout experience: through all space and time, through all relationships and through all causes and effects.

‘The subtle substance “ether” is essentially unmanifest. Unlike gross matter, it is not manifested by its separation into different objects and events. Instead, it underlies experience, as the continuing background that is implicitly understood in the perception of all objects and events. It is the continuing background of the entire world: the complete background of all-containing space, time and causality.’
From 3.8.5 and 3.8.7

She said: ‘Salutation to you, Yājñavalkya, who have answered this [first question] of mine. Hold ready for the other...

‘In what indeed is ether woven, warp and woof?’

3.8.8

He said: ‘Gārgī, those who know reality describe it as the changeless.

‘Not gross, nor fine, not short, nor long, not flaming red, nor syrupy,
‘not shade, nor darkness, not air, nor ether;
‘not connected, without taste or smell, without eyes and ears or speech or mind;
‘not sharp, it has no vital force or face or measure, no inside, no outside.

‘It does not consume anything. Nothing consumes it.

‘Yes, this is a satisfying answer, and it leads to my second question. On what basis does this continuing background pervade all of existence?’

‘The basis of all space, all time, all cause, cannot itself be changed, nor qualified, by changing qualities of space and time and cause. Thus, it is described as “changeless”.

‘It is not coarse, nor yet refined; it is not long or short, nor wet or dry; nor has it colour, shade or darkness, taste or smell.

‘It is not “air”, nor “ether”: for it has no qualities, and it cannot be related to anything besides itself.

‘It has no eyes, no ears, no speech, no mind; it is not sharp, nor has it vital force, nor face, nor measure. Nor does it consume, nor is consumed. It has no outside, nor inside.'
Under the guidance of this same changeless principle, Gaṛgī, the sun and moon are kept in place.

Under the guidance of this same changeless principle, Gaṛgī, heaven and earth are kept in place.

Moments pass in due succession, seasons alternate and years pass by. Rivers rise and flow from mountains. People work to seek reward.

Rivers flow from white mountains, some eastwards, some westwards, each in its own direction.

People praise those who give; the gods are connected with the sacrificer, the ancestors with the darvi offering.

Based on this changeless principle, the sun and moon are kept on course, and heaven and earth remain in place.

Moments pass in due succession, days give way to nights and nights to days, seasons alternate and years pass by. Rivers rise and flow from mountains. People work to seek reward.
3.8.10

‘Gārgī, whoever does not know this changeless principle,
‘but in this world makes offerings and sacrifices,
‘and intensifies self-discipline, thousands of years;
‘for such a person that [achievement] is merely passing.

‘Gārgī, whoever leaves this world in ignorance of this changeless principle is an object of pity.

‘But Gārgī, one who leaves the world with knowledge of this changeless principle realizes everything.

‘Wherever there is ignorance of this one changeless principle, work but results in passing gain.

‘To leave the world in ignorance of changeless truth is misery.

‘But one who knows this changeless truth has reached the goal of all desire, and leaves the world in deathless peace with nothing further to attain.

3.8.11

‘This, Gārgī, is that same changeless principle which is not seen, but is the see-er;
‘which is not heard, but is the hearer;
‘which is not thought, but is the thinker;
‘which is not known, but is the knower.

‘This changeless principle cannot be seen: it is the see-er.

‘It can’t be heard: it is the hearer.

‘It can’t be thought: it is the thinker.

‘It can’t be known: it is the knower.
‘Other than this, there is no see-er.

‘Other than this, there is no hearer.

‘Other than this, there is no thinker.

‘Other than this, there is no knower.

‘Gārgī, in this very changeless principle, the ether is woven, warp and woof.’

‘Nothing else can see or hear or think or feel or understand.

‘Nothing else can know at all.

‘Gārgī, this changeless, knowing principle is the basis on which stands the all-pervading continuity called “ether”. This is the ultimate basis of all apparent existence.’

**Objective and subjective**

Towards the end of the preceding passage, there is a significant change of approach: from objective to subjective. Where Yājñavalkya has been describing a changeless principle that underlies all the changes of the perceived world, he suddenly reverses the direction of attention, from that which is known to that which knows: ‘This same … changeless principle … is not seen, but is the see-er; … is not known, but is the knower.’ (3.8.11)

In the following translation and retelling from the Chāndogya Upanishad, 3.18.1, the distinction of objective and subjective approaches is made explicit. Here, the word ‘ākāsha’ is translated as ‘the overarching space of sky’.

**Translation (from the Chāndogya Upanishad)**

3.18.1

Mind may be meditated on as all reality: this with regard to inner self.

**Retelling (from FTU, page 108)**

Subjectively, the thinking principle may be considered all reality, all that there is.
Next, with regard to gods above: the overarching space of sky as all reality.

These two are advised: with regard to inner self, and with regard to gods above.

And then objectively, the background of the world, continuing through all appearances in space and time, may be considered all there is, all true reality.

Both of these meditations are advised: the first subjectively, the second one objectively.

Unchanging self

What is the subjective approach, which enquires into the nature of ‘the knower’ or the ‘inner self’?

In the following translation and retelling of excerpted passages from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, chapter 4, self is described as the illuminating principle of consciousness: which continues unchanged through all the apparent changes of each person’s experience. Here, ‘ākāsha’ is translated as ‘space’ or as ‘the background of space’.

Translation (from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad) Retelling (from FTU, pages 83-93)

4.3.7

‘Which is the self?’ ‘But then, what is this knowing self?’

‘That which is this, whose nature is consciousness in living functions, ‘It is the light of consciousness within each living creature’s heart.

‘the light within the heart, purusha [the principle of personality].

‘Being the same, it journeys through both worlds, ‘And though it seems to journey through a waking world of outside things or inner worlds of dreaming mind,'
seeming to think and move.

For, sleeping, it transcends the world, the forms of death.

4.3.8

It, this same purusha, being born, assuming a body, is projected mixed with ills. Departing, dying, it gives up ills.

4.3.9

Of that indeed, of this purusha, there are two states: this and the other-worldly state. At the junction is the third: the state of sleep.

There are two seeming states of self: as body in an outside world; or mind, conceiving subtle worlds made up of its own thoughts and dreams.

But, joining these apparent states, is that third state where seeming stops, where thoughts and dreams have all dissolved and no appearances remain.

This is the state of dreamless sleep; the timeless state that is achieved when meditation stills the mind; the state between successive thoughts, where previous thought has come to end and further thought has not begun.

Here, in this unconditioned state, self shines unmixed with alien things that make it seem what it is not.
'Standing at that joining state, it sees these two: ‘this and the other-worldly state. ‘Now, whatever is the way to the other-worldly state, when that way is taken both ills and joys are seen. ‘When it goes to sleep, it takes back the measure of this all-containing world. ‘Having itself destroyed, having itself created, by its own radiance, by its own light, it sleeps. ‘Here, this purusha itself is light.

4.3.10

‘In that, there are no chariots, nor those in harness to chariots, nor roads; ‘but it projects chariots, and those in harness, and roads. ‘In that, there are no joys, no pleasures, no delights; ‘but it projects joys, pleasures and delights.

‘Remaining always in this state of unconditioned purity, self lights the body’s waking world and worlds of mind that dreaming brings. ‘Whatever state seems to appear, all seeming ills and seeming joys are lit and known by self alone. ‘As mind withdraws from world in sleep, the whole created world dissolves in all creation’s shining source: where self is light which lights itself. ‘Here, where all dreams dissolve in light from which they come, there is no change, nor cause of change, nor place for change. There is no need for fancy’s flight, there are no bounds, there is no pain.
'In that, there are
no pools of water,
no lotus ponds,
no flowing streams;

‘but it projects
pools, lotus ponds
and streams.

‘For, it is the creator.

4.3.11

‘[On] that,
there are these verses:

“By sleep annihilating
bodily existence,

“this that does not sleep
looks out
on sleeping things.

“And, taking light
back in again,
it comes to [its] place:
[this] golden purusha,
sole swan [one spirit
in all things].

4.3.12

“Guarding the
inferior nest [the body]
by living breath,
it journeys on undying,
beyond, outside the nest;

“and [thus]
goes deathless
where desire [wills]:

“[this] golden purusha,
sole swan [one spirit
in all things]....”

‘When body sleeps, the body’s world
dissolves in unmixed consciousness;
as body’s seeming consciousness
returns again to its true source
in that unsleeping, deathless self
which knows all worlds, all dreams, all sleep.

‘The body’s seeming life is bound
to breath, to circulating blood,
to many other vital needs
that keep our bodies functioning.

‘But self is free, it has no needs;
it is untouched by seeming change.
As life itself, it cannot die.

‘Through passing states of wakefulness
and dream and sleep, the self alone
goes on from state to state, unchanged.
From 4.3.15-17

‘That is just this,
in this pure serenity.
‘Enjoying itself
and moving,
‘merely seeing
good and ill,
‘it runs back in reverse,
back to source:
for sleep itself.

‘There, whatever it sees,
it is not followed by that;
for this purusha
is unattached....

‘That is just this,
in this sleep.
‘Enjoying itself
and moving,
‘merely seeing
good and ill,
‘it runs back in reverse,
back to source:
for the very end of waking.

‘There, whatever it sees,
it is not followed by that;
for this purusha
is unattached....

‘That is just this,
in this end of waking.

‘Enjoying itself
and moving,
‘merely seeing
good and ill,

‘In sleep, in dreams, in wakefulness,
the self is always free: unchanged
by all the good and evil things
that seem to pass before its light.

‘It only knows, it does not act;
and so it cannot be attached.
it runs back in reverse,  
back to source:  
for the very end of sleep.

4.4.16

‘That in front of which 
the year revolves 
together with its days;  
to that 
the gods pay heed:  
‘the light of lights,  
the lasting principle 
of deathless life.

‘Before the self, all moments pass,  
each day proceeds and turns to night,  
each season gives way to the next,  
and seasons cycle into years.

‘For self is knowing consciousness,  
which knows all time, all place, all things.  
It is the ever-present light  
that lights all lights in all we know.

4.4.17

‘That in which 
the five groups of five  
and the background  
of space  
are established;  
‘by thinking of self  
as that alone,  
‘one who [thus] knows  
the deathless absolute  
is deathless.

‘Through all appearances that come 
and go in our experience,  
this knowing consciousness goes on  
from difference to difference,  
from change to change. And through all change  
it is the vital core of life,  
which lasts, as all else comes and goes.

‘This never-changing consciousness  
is that immortal absolute  
upon which all experience rests.  
Just knowing it brings deathlessness.

4.4.18

‘Those who have known  
the breath of breath,  
the eye of eye,  
the ear of ear,  
the mind of mind;  
‘they have realized  
the ancient,  
primordial  
absolute.

‘It is the living principle  
in all the various lives we lead.  
It is the seeing principle  
in all the various sights we see.  
It is the hearing principle  
in all appearances of sound.
‘Through mind alone to be perceived,
in it there’s no diversity at all.

‘Whoever seems to see diversity in it,
goes on from death to death.

4.4.20-21

‘As one alone to be perceived, it is immeasurable, permanent.

‘Stainless, beyond all space, the unborn self is great and permanent.

‘Recognizing that alone, a steadfast realist should work for knowledge.

‘Let there not be [mere] thought of many words; for that is weariness of speech.

‘It is the knowing principle in all our minds’ experiences:
in all the meanings we perceive,
in all the various thoughts we think,
in all the feelings that we feel.

‘But, in this knowing principle, which knows all change and difference,
no change or difference exists.

‘Whoever sees diversity and change sees but appearances, which only lead from death to death.

‘Self is that one unchanging truth which can't be known by changing mind.

‘Shared in common by all difference, stainless through all imperfection, never born in all creation, limitless through space and time; beyond all words, beyond all thought, beyond all forms and qualities;

‘self is known by simply being, because its nature is to shine.
**From 4.4.22**

‘This is that same
great unborn self,
whose nature is
this consciousness
in living functions.

‘In this space
within the heart,
it rests:
the controller of all,
the lord and ruler
of everything.

‘It is not increased
by work well done,
nor diminished
by work ill done:

‘this lord of all,
this ruler of beings,
this protector of beings.

‘This is the bridge
that holds apart,
for the separation
and the joining
of these worlds....’

‘True self is unborn consciousness,
the ground of all experience,
from which appearances are born.

‘It is life in living function,
source and aim of all intention,
untouched depth of all emotion,
infinite, within each heart.

‘No action can affect this self:
good actions cannot make it grow,
bad actions cannot cause it loss.

It is complete reality,
beyond all partial-seeming things.

‘This is the underlying ground
from which all difference seems to rise,
on which all different things seem to
exist apart, to which all
seeming difference must return again....’

**Continuity**

Towards the end of the preceding translation (4.4.22), the self is said to
rest ‘in this space within the heart’: where the word ‘space’ again translates
the Sanskrit ‘ākāśha’. What is this ‘space within the heart’?

As described earlier (pages 61-64), when ‘ākāśha’ is conceived objectively,
it refers to ‘space’ as the continuing background which relates together the
differing and changing objects that we perceive in the outside world. Thus,
when ‘ākāśha’ is conceived subjectively, as ‘within the heart’, it evidently
describes a corresponding background of ‘inner’ experience. More simply
put, it is the background of consciousness: which continues through experi-
ence, while perceptions, thoughts and feelings come and go.
But then, what is the relationship between this background of subjective experience and the background of the world? Ultimately, in each person’s experience, everything in the world is known subjectively. Each object is experienced through perception, thought and feeling. As the background of consciousness continues through perceptions, thoughts and feelings, it also continues through all experience of the world. It is thus the continuing background not only of subjective experience, but also of the entire world.

Such a reconciliation of subjective and objective approaches is described in the following translation and retelling of excerpted passages from the Chāndogya Upanishad, 8.1-4. Here, the Sanskrit word ‘ākāsha’ is once again translated as ‘space’ (in 8.1.1,3).

This translation and retelling may be taken as an instance where a rather cryptic and condensed original has been retold by supplementing it with a considerable degree of interpretation, explanation and elaboration. In particular, the retelling includes an explanatory introduction which does not correspond directly to any passage in the original.

**Translation (from the Chāndogya Upanishad)**

Our bodies, senses and our minds keep changing in a changing world. And so, whatever they perceive is by its nature changeable.

But, as this change keeps going on, how is it known that things have changed? How can something be compared with what it was before it changed?

Where variation is perceived, what is it that knows the change of passing states which come and go?

It must be there before the change, to know the state that was before. And it must still be there when change has taken place, to know what has become of what was there before.

**Retelling (from FTU, pages 121-125)**

**Explanatory introduction added into retelling**

Our bodies, senses and our minds keep changing in a changing world. And so, whatever they perceive is by its nature changeable.

But, as this change keeps going on, how is it known that things have changed? How can something be compared with what it was before it changed?

Where variation is perceived, what is it that knows the change of passing states which come and go?

It must be there before the change, to know the state that was before. And it must still be there when change has taken place, to know what has become of what was there before.
In 8.1.1 and 8.1.4, the phrase, ‘this stronghold of the absolute’, refers to personality (i.e. body, senses and mind): in the sense that personality is the apparent ‘stronghold’ of consciousness, which is in truth the absolute. A little later, in 8.1.5, it is shown that the real ‘stronghold of the absolute’ is not perishable personality, but the changeless self (which is pure consciousness, unmixed with body, senses and mind). See page 95 and following, for further discussion about these concepts of personality and the impersonal principle that lives within.

From 8.1.1

Om. Assuredly, in this stronghold

Wherever there is variation, that which knows must carry on through changing states that come and go.

Each state gives way to other states, but that which knows the change remains.

This knowing principle remains unchanged, unvarying: through all the change and all the variations body, sense and mind perceive.

Whatever is perceived must vary; that which knows is never changed.

As body, sense and mind perceive, appearances of world are formed. And all of these appearances are known by light of consciousness.

Perception isn’t that which knows; it only forms appearances through changing body, sense and mind.

That which knows is consciousness; it lights up all appearances. It’s always there, throughout experience, always shines by its own light.

Perception changes every moment; consciousness remains unchanged.

At the surface of our minds, things appear and disappear:

1In 8.1.1 and 8.1.4, the phrase, ‘this stronghold of the absolute’, refers to personality (i.e. body, senses and mind): in the sense that personality is the apparent ‘stronghold’ of consciousness, which is in truth the absolute. A little later, in 8.1.5, it is shown that the real ‘stronghold of the absolute’ is not perishable personality, but the changeless self (which is pure consciousness, unmixed with body, senses and mind). See page 95 and following, for further discussion about these concepts of personality and the impersonal principle that lives within.
of the absolute, as attention is directed
that which is this from one object to the next.
subtle lotus flower Beneath this stream of changing show,
is a home. different things must be related
In it is at the background of experience,
a subtle where each thing is understood.
inner space....

From 8.1.3

... Just as great as
the space [of all
the world] is this inner
space within the heart.

In itself, As mind’s outer surface changes,
contained within, are consciousness continues on,
both heaven and earth, putting different things together
both fire and air, at the depth of understanding:
both sun and moon, changeless background of experience,
lightning and the stars, inner basis of the mind.

Whatever of this is
and whatever is not,
all that is
contained in it.

From 8.1.4 2

... If, If all existence is thus found
in this stronghold within each person’s mind and heart,
of the absolute, what happens when a person dies?

2See footnote 1, just above.
is contained all this,
all beings and all desires;
then what remains of this
when old age comes to it
or when it is destroyed?
Can all of being be destroyed,
when some poor mind in little body
suffers harm and passes on?

From 8.1.5

... By the ageing
of this [body],
it does not age.

By the killing
of this [body],
it is not killed.

It is the truth,
the [real] stronghold
of the absolute.

But consciousness illuminates
itself; it shines by its own light.
It does not rise or pass away.

In it,
desires are contained.

It is the self:
free of evils,
free of old age,
free from death,
free from grief,
free of hunger
and thirst;
desiring truth,
thinking truth....

8.4.1

Assuredly,
that which is self
is the bridge
and boundary

Self is the continuity
that lives unchanged through change; it is
the bridge that joins all differences.

3See footnote 1, just above.
that separates
and joins these worlds.

No night or day,
nor age, nor death,
nor grief,
nor good action,
nor bad action,
crosses over
onto this bridge.

All ills turn back from it;
for it is free of evils,
this place of the absolute.

8.4.2

Truly therefore,
crossing over
to this bridge,
the blind becomes
not blind,
the wounded becomes
not wounded,
the afflicted becomes
not afflicted.

Truly therefore,
crossing over
to this bridge,
even night turns out
to be just day,

for it is fully well
illuminated, this place of
the absolute.

And yet, it also is the basis
of discrimination, by which
different things are told apart.

When understanding passes from
appearance to reality,
no day or night, no height or depth,
no age, nor death, nor fear, nor grief,
nor good or bad can pass to self;

for no conditioned quality
of seeming world applies to it.

As truth of self is realized,
all blindness is removed from sight,
all wounds are healed, all pain dissolves,
all bonds are loosed, all lack is filled;

and darkness shines as dazzling light
of unconditioned consciousness.
Life

Energy

In the Upanishads, as in so much of traditional thought, life was often conceived through the metaphor of ‘living breath’. This metaphor is expressed in the Sanskrit word ‘prāṇa’. Literally, ‘prāṇa’ means ‘breathing forth’ or ‘breathing onward’. But it also carries a more metaphorical sense of meaning: as ‘life’ or ‘living spirit’ or ‘the breath of life’.

In this sense, life was conceived as a kind of subtle energy: which animates the living actions of our bodies and minds, and which similarly animates the actions of other living creatures that we perceive in the world around us.

Moreover, all movements in the entire universe were conceived to act together, in a single living ‘macrocasm’. Just as each living creature is motivated by its own energy of individual life; so too the entire universe was conceived to be animated by a universal living energy, expressed in everything that happens everywhere.

In Sanskrit, the perceived universe is commonly described by the word ‘jagat’: which is the present participle of the common verb ‘gam’, meaning ‘to go’ or ‘to move’. Thus ‘jagat’ quite simply means ‘moving’; and when it is used to describe the world as a whole, it implies a totality of perceived movements manifesting the universal energy that underlies them all. This conception is described in the following translation and retelling from the Katha Upanishad, 6.2. Here, the word ‘prāṇa’ is translated as ‘living energy’; and the word ‘jagat’ is translated as the ‘changing universe’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation (from the Katha Upanishad)</th>
<th>Retelling (from FTU, page 35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.2 That which is all this changing universe, whatever has come forth, is living energy.</td>
<td>The whole created universe is made of living energy that moves and oscillates and shines.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It moves and oscillates and shines:

a great terror, an uplifted thunderbolt.

This boundless store of restless cosmic energy has terrible destructive power. It’s like an uplifted thunderbolt: to petty ego’s fragile life, identified with little body, sense and mind.

They who know this become deathless.

But if, transcending petty ego, all the world is known as life – as only living energy – then how can death arise at all?

For one who knows the world like this, as only life, there is no death. In truth, there’s only deathlessness.

Expression

Modern developments in physics, in particular in relativity and quantum field theory, have made us familiar with the idea of a changing universe made up of underlying energy. But what is meant by describing this energy as ‘living’?

Basically, movements and actions are called ‘living’ when they are implied to express some sort of underlying consciousness. And then, we do not understand these movements and actions merely by looking out to external objects that act upon one another. In addition, we reflect back into our own experience, in order to understand the underlying consciousness that is expressed in living behaviour.

By contrast with the objective energy that is described and manipulated through the calculations of physical science, living energy is understood by subjective reflection: as expressing an underlying consciousness that is shared in common by observer and observed.

Such reflective understanding is most obvious in our knowledge of human beings and other living creatures; but it is also an essential, though more subtle component in our knowledge of the world as a whole. For, in order to put our fragmentary knowledge together, objective calculations are insufficient in themselves. They depend upon underlying principles of order and meaning, which we somehow understand in them. And this understand-
ing requires a subjective reflection into our own consciousness, where underly-
ing principles are found shared in common with the external world.

However we put together knowledge of the world, and however we con-
ceive of its functioning as a whole, our knowledge is based upon subjective
principles of order and meaning from our own consciousness.

Thus, both for living creatures and for the world as a whole, there are two
different levels of consideration. First, they may be considered objectively:
as made up of objects or objective parts that act upon one another. And
second, they may be considered subjectively: as expressing consciousness.
In the first case, they are treated as mere instruments or objects of action,
external to life. In the second case, they are treated as ‘living’ or ‘alive’.

This rather delicate question of expression is raised in the Prashna Upan-
ishad, 3.3, which says that life (‘praṇa’) appears in the body as a shadow-
image (‘chāyā’) produced from inner self by the activity of mind:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ātmana esha praṇo jāyate} & \quad \text{From self, this life is born.} \\
\text{yathāishā purushe} & \quad \text{Just as this on purusha} \\
\text{chāy-} & \quad \text{is a [mere] shadow-image;} \\
\text{aitasmin} & \quad [\text{so too] upon this [self,} \\
\text{etad ātatam} & \quad \text{this that is drawn out} \\
\text{manokriten-} & \quad \text{by mind’s activity} \\
\text{āyāty asmin charire} & \quad \text{comes into this body.}
\end{align*}
\]

The literal translation above is meant to show two particular problems
that arise when interpreting this passage. One problem occurs in the second
line, where the word ‘purusha’ can be interpreted either as ‘a person’ or as
‘the indwelling principle of personality’. The other problem occurs in the
fifth line, where the word ‘this’ is used to translate the Sanskrit ‘etat’. The
difficulty here is that ‘etat’ is neuter; and hence it cannot refer to any of the
preceding nouns, which are all either masculine or feminine. So it is discon-
certingly wide open to interpretation.

The following translation and retelling try to be more easily intelligible,
by making specific choices that bring out one particular aspect of meaning.
The word ‘purusha’ is translated as ‘consciousness’ (by identifying conscious-
ness as the indwelling spirit of personality). And the word ‘etat’ (‘this’) is
interpreted as referring specifically to ‘living movement’: or in other words
to movement as animated by life. In Sanskrit (as described just above, in the
previous section of this chapter), such a concept of animated movement is
typically represented by the neuter noun ‘jagat’, to which ‘etat’ could thus
be taken to refer.
Translation (from the Prashna Upanishad)  
Retelling (from FTU, page 171)

3.3

This life is born from self.  
Just like some shadow-image [drawn] on consciousness,  
this [living movement] is drawn out upon the [self].

By mind’s activity,  
it comes to be in body here.

Each person’s life is born from self,  
appearing like a moving image drawn by mind on consciousness.

Through this activity of mind,  
life is expressed in body’s acts.

Learning

As consciousness is expressed in the course of experience, a process of learning takes place, through a cyclic reflection of attention back and forth between consciousness and the perceived world.

- As attention goes out from consciousness towards the world, what has been learned from past experience is expressed – through understanding, feeling, thought and action – towards objects and events.

- When attention has thus turned to particular objects and events, consciousness continues to be expressed through perception, interpretation, judgement and comprehension: which assimilate new learning, through a reflection of attention back to underlying consciousness.

In the course of future experience, such assimilated learning is expressed in new understanding, feeling, thoughts and actions; and so the cycle continues, as illustrated in the following diagram:
This cycle of learning includes the entire process of life, in which all living faculties take part. Accordingly, life as a whole may be conceived as an ongoing process of learning and development, in which living experience is repeatedly ‘breathed’ out and in. From underlying consciousness, learning from past experience is ‘breathed’ out into the perceived world; thus giving rise to new experiences that are ‘breathed’ back in.

The traditional metaphor of ‘vital breath’, or ‘prāṇa’, was further used to describe a division of life into different vital faculties. In the Indian tradition in particular, the word ‘prāṇa’ is used in two ways. On the one hand, it is used to describe life as a continuing whole; and here it has the generic sense of ‘ongoing life’ or ‘ongoing breath’. On the other hand, it was also used to describe five ‘prāṇas’ or ‘vital faculties’, each of which plays a particular part in the whole process of ongoing life.

One of these vital faculties was called ‘apāna’, which can be translated literally as the ‘reverse breath’. A second was confusingly called ‘prāṇa’, where the term is not now being used in its generic sense of ‘ongoing life’ or ‘ongoing breath’, but in a more limited sense that can be translated literally as the ‘forward breath’. The three remaining vital faculties were ‘vyāna’ (literally the ‘discerning or disseminating breath’), ‘udāna’ (literally the ‘ascending breath’) and ‘samāna’ (literally the ‘integrating breath’).

These five vital faculties (the ‘panca-prāṇas’) have been explained rather differently in different texts and commentaries. In the following diagram, an attempt is made to interpret them as parts of the cycle of learning that has just been described above:
Essentially, the same interpretation of the five ‘prāṇas’ or ‘vital breaths’ is made in the following translation and retelling of the Prashna Upanishad, 3.4-12. As shown below in the translation of 3.5-6, the original text associates the vital breaths with various bodily organs in which they are supposed to act. However, such bodily organs, like the eyes or the mouth, are clearly meant to represent more subtle living faculties, like sight and speech, with which the vital breaths are more essentially associated. And further, as shown in 3.7 and 3.9-12, the text describes the vital breaths as essentially concerned with the process of ongoing experience: in which old experiences subside and lead on to new experiences, until a clarified understanding of life itself leads finally to undying truth.

The retelling modifies the original text by trying to interpret its bodily metaphors in terms of a more explicitly described cycle of living faculties, which express consciousness in the course of ongoing experience.
Translation (from the Prashna Upanishad)

Retelling (from FTU, pages 171-173)

3.4
As an emperor commands his officers, telling each to govern these villages or those villages; so too, this prāṇa [life] appoints the other prāṇas each to its own place.

3.5-7
Apāna [is appointed] to the excretory and reproductive organs. In eye and ear, together with the mouth and nose, prāṇa itself is established.

Samāna, however, is in the middle; for it leads offered food to assimilation.

From that arise these seven flames [perceptive faculties lodged in the seven orifices of the head – two eyes, two ears, two nostrils and the mouth].

For, in the heart is this self.

As life expresses consciousness, it carries out its purposes through various different faculties that are divisions of itself.

One of these faculties [apāna] reacts to objects that have been perceived: discarding waste, restricting aims, and thus creating partial views of world, as it appears perceived.

A second of these faculties [prāṇa] looks on from what is now perceived: projecting choices, from the past, through life that carries on in time.

A third among these faculties [samāna] assimilates perceptions and interpretations into knowledge at the background of the mind: where what is known is understood. There, silent understanding knows, unmoved by passing wants and needs noised out by wish and fantasy.
Here, there is this:
a hundred and
one channels;
from them a hundred
offshoots] each;
in each of these [again]
seventy-two thousand
offshoot channels arise.

In these, moves vyāna.

Next, rising up
through one of these,
uḍāna leads:
through good
to a good world,
through ill to ill,
through both indeed
to the world of men.

3.8-9

Essentially,
the sun rises as prāṇa
[seen in the world]
outside;
for it is that which assists
the [inner] prāṇa
associated with the eye.

That which is this
divinity in earth
ties down
a person’s apāna.

And [as for] that
which is in between:
pervading space,
that is samāṇa;

A fourth among the faculties [vyāṇa]
goes circulating back and forth,
contrast[ing and comparing things:
thus judging valued qualities
and spreading subtle influence.

A fifth among the faculties [uḍāna]
expresses understanding which
has come from past experience: so
that learning may continue on.

These different faculties relate
to different aspects of the world
that everyone experiences.

External choice that’s mere reaction
corresponds to narrow objects
which attention has selected
from a world of many things.

Intention looking on through time
relates to processes of change,
by which all objects have been formed
and all objectives are achieved.

Understanding corresponds
to underlying principles,
continuing through change and difference
in the world’s appearances.
the air is vyāna. Discerning judgement corresponds
to qualities and values that
our feelings judge and thoughts compare
in the world that mind conceives.

Essentially, fire is udāna. Expression rising from within
Thus, those in whom
[life’s] fire has subsided
[go on to]
renewed becoming,

with senses
taken into mind.

3.10
With what is thought,
one comes to life [prāṇa]. Each moment of our changing lives,
we come to life conditioned by
those influences from the past
that lead on to our future lives.

Life, joined to fire
and self, leads on
to world that thus
becomes conceived.

Whatever’s learnt is thus reborn
from death of past experiences,
as seeming life keeps cycling on
from death to birth and birth to death.

3.11-12
Who knows life thus
is [truly] wise. But underlying seeming life
What comes from him
is never driven,
nor inadequate.
Where life arises and returns
He realizes
deathlessness.
and living truly is alive?

As to that
there is this verse:
‘The origin of life,
its coming [here],
its standing place,

by living energy of change:
which burns what’s happened in the past,
thus forming new experiences.
'and also its
fivefold extension,
and indeed its
self-related-ness:

‘knowing [these],
one obtains
deathlessness.’

**The living principle**

What is the essential principle of life, shared in common by all living faculties and all the living acts of a person’s body, senses and mind?

In the Kaushitaki Upanishad, 3.2-3, this essential living principle is identified as ‘prajnyåtman’: which means ‘the self that consists of consciousness’ or, more briefly, ‘the self of consciousness’.

**Translation** (from the Kaushitaki Upanishad)  
**Retelling** (from FTU, pages 148-151)

From 3.2

---

... Some say:

‘The living faculties proceed towards becoming one;

‘for none alone would be able acting jointly to make known:

‘a name through speech, a sight through seeing, a sound through hearing, a thought through mind.

‘Essentially becoming one,

‘the living faculties arise, one by one,

---

Each living personality seems made of different faculties: each one expressing consciousness in its own ways, at its own times.

And yet these different faculties somehow express a unity of knowledge that co-ordinates names that are known by speaking them, sights that are known by seeing them, sounds that are known by hearing them, thoughts that are known by thinking them.

As different objects are thus known in different ways, at different times, through different seeming faculties,
'and make all these things known.'

When speech speaks, all faculties are speaking there along with it. Thus when speech speaks, all other faculties are somehow understood to be expressed in what is said.

When sight sees, all faculties are seeing there along with it. Or when sight sees, all other faculties are somehow understood to be expressed in what is seen.

When hearing hears, all faculties are hearing there along with it. When hearing hears, all other faculties are somehow understood to be expressed in what is heard.

When mind thinks, all faculties are thinking there along with it. And when mind thinks, all other faculties are somehow understood to be expressed in what is thought.

That's how it is.... and yet, essentially, belonging to [all] living faculties, there is a higher principle. Within these living faculties, one common principle of life is shared beneath their differences. And this one living principle, though from within, contains them all.

From 3.3

One lives bereft of speech, for we see the dumb. What is essential to all life?

It cannot be the faculty of speech; for there are those whom we call ‘dumb’, who do not speak, but who are still essentially alive.
One lives
bereft of sight,
for we see the blind.

One lives
bereft of hearing,
for we see the deaf.

One lives
bereft of mind,
for we see the infantile.

One lives
with arms cut off;
one lives
with legs cut off.

We say this
because, we say,
this is how we see it.

But then, in truth,
life in itself
is consciousness,
the [real] self,
which holds this
body all around
and causes it
to rise [alive].

Therefore, it is said,
one should heed
this alone
as the source (uktaha).

This is the all-obtaining
in the breath of life.

Nor can it be the faculties
of sight or hearing; for we know
of those whom we call ‘blind’ or ‘deaf’,
who do not see or do not hear,
but who are still essentially alive.

And further too, we know of those
whose loss of outward sight or hearing
even strengthens inner life.

Nor can life’s essence be the mind.
For can we say that life has gone,
where understanding is attained
and all mind’s complex, changing acts
come to an end in simple truth?

Or can we say that life is missing,
where desires are achieved
and mind dissolves in happiness?

And can we say that life is absent
in the state of dreamless sleep,
where mind’s perceptions, thoughts and feelings
all dissolve in rest and peace?

Life is essentially the source
from which all living acts arise.
It is the ground on which they stand,
and into which they are absorbed
when they return to source again.

Thus truly known, life in itself
is consciousness, the real self:
which holds this body all around
and causes it to rise, alive.
Essentially, that which is the breath of life is consciousness. And that which is consciousness is the breath of life. Wherever life is seen in body, consciousness is found implied. Wherever consciousness is seen expressed in body, so is life. Thus ‘life’ and ‘consciousness’ are different names for one same principle: which makes this body seem alive, and knows all that is ever known in everyone’s experience.
The impersonal basis of personality

‘Human-ness’

In ordinary Sanskrit, as in many modern Indian languages, the word ‘purusha’ means ‘a man’ or ‘a human being’ or ‘a person’. However, the word has also a special philosophical usage, which occurs over and over again in the Upanishads.

Thus philosophically used, the word ‘purusha’ does not refer to any particular man or human being or person, considered as a differentiated object among other objects in the world. Instead, in its philosophical usage, the word ‘purusha’ describes an essential principle of ‘human-ness’ which is shared in common by all different-seeming men, all different-seeming human beings and all different-seeming personalities.

As it is put in the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, 2.5.18:

… sa vā
ayam purushah
sarvāsu pūrshu
purishayah …

That, in truth,
is this ‘human-ness’
in all bodies:
abiding [here] at rest within the body.

In this passage, the word used for ‘body’ is ‘pur’, which literally means ‘a rampart wall’ or ‘a fortified enclosure’ or ‘a fortress’ or ‘a walled town or city’. The body is thus conceived as mere outward fortification: within which the inner principle called ‘purusha’ lives at peace, undisturbed by the conflicts and destructions of the outside world.

Moreover, this inner principle of ‘human-ness’ is not conceived to live only in some special bodies that we call ‘human’, to the exclusion of other bodies in the universe. Instead, all bodies and the entire universe are conceived to somehow express the same living principle which human beings find within themselves. Thus conceived, this same inner principle of ‘human-ness’ is to be found everywhere: expressed in all matter and all personality, throughout the universe.

Such a conception of all-embracing, all-pervading ‘human-ness’ is described in the following translation and retelling from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, 2.5 (of which the above quotation is a part).
2.5.1

This earth is the honey of all beings. All creatures feed on fruit of earth; and earth, in turn, is fed by them.

To this earth, all beings are honey.

This which is in this earth is radiant, deathless 'human-ness'.

Both in earth and in each person, that which shines and never dies is our common 'human-ness'.

And this which is the spiritual [principle] associated with the body is radiant, deathless 'human-ness'.

Both in earth and in each person, that which shines and never dies is our common 'human-ness'.

This is just that which is this self.

This is the self each person is.

This is deathless. It is that same reality
This is complete reality. which always lives, unchanged, complete,
This is all. in every partial-seeming thing.

2.5.15

That, in truth, is this self:
the Lord of all beings,
the King of all beings.

This self is lord and king of all.

Just as all the spokes of a chariot[-wheel] are fixed together at the hub and rim;
As in a wheel, all spokes are joined together at the hub and rim;
so too, all things, all gods, all worlds,
all lives, all separate-seeming selves are joined together in the self.
so too all beings,
all gods, all worlds,
all living energies
and all these selves
are fixed together
in the self.

From 2.5.18

... That, in truth,
is this ‘human-ness’
in all our bodies:
abiding [here] at rest
within the body.

There is nothing
uncontained by it;
nothing that is
not pervaded by it.

From 2.5.19

... ‘It has become
the likeness of
form after form.

‘That is its form, for
observation round about.

‘Through the powers
of illusion, Indra
[chieftain of the gods]
is arisen, many-formed;
‘for yoked of him
are [many] horses:
ten [of them],
hundreds [of them].’

This, in truth,
is the horses.

This, which lives in all our bodies,
is our common ‘human-ness’.

Outside this, there’s no existence.
Nothing is, apart from this.

It is this that takes the likeness
of each form that is perceived.

From appearance thus created
come the many forms of God,
harnessing those many
different faculties of sense and action
which create our seeming world.

All our senses, all our bodies,
all the many, countless things
they see and touch, are nothing but
this one same self in each of us.
This, in truth, is the ten; is the thousands; many and unlimited.

That is this complete reality: with nothing else beside itself, with nothing else before itself, with nothing else that follows on, with no outside and no inside.

with no outside and no inside.

This self is all reality, experiencing everything. Thus it is taught: ‘This self is in itself complete. It knows all things, and all it knows is but itself.’

Thus is the teaching.

**Universal and individual**

The philosophical concept of ‘purusha’, as ‘human-ness’, can be approached in two, complementary ways.

- On the one hand, it may be approached universally: as a universal living principle that is found expressed in all personalities, in all minds and in all bodies, and thus in the universe as a whole.

- On the other hand, it may be approached individually: as the individual living principle that is found expressed in each particular personality, in each particular mind and in each particular body in the universe.

These two approaches are described in the following translation and retelling from the Shvetāśvatara Upanishad, chapter 3. This chapter describes the part-mystical, part-philosophical conception of ‘virāṭ purusha’; where God is conceived as a universal personality: whose body is the totality of all particular bodies in the world, whose mind is the sum total of all particular minds, and whose self is the complete reality that underlies all physical and mental phenomena throughout the universe.

Over and over again (in 3.2,7,11,13,18,20 and 21), the complete reality of the universal self is explicitly identified with the inner principle of self within each particular individual.

In the following translation, the word ‘purusha’ is translated as ‘the principle of personality’.
The impersonal basis of personality

Translation (from the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad) Retelling (from FTU, pages 245-250)

From 3.1

It is the one with the net, ruling with its sovereign powers, 

ruling all the world with its powers;

this which alone is one: in arising and in happening....

God is conceived to hold the web of circumstance, thus ruling all the world, with powers over everything.

This universal principle, conceived as ‘God’, is one alone: in all that is created and in all that happens in the world.

From 3.2

... Not as second do they stand.... It has no second, as it stands here facing everyone within.

It stands facing people within themselves....

From 3.7

Beyond that is the absolute, the great beyond.

[Here] individually in every body, it is hidden in all beings, the one [reality] containing all the world....

It is complete reality, unlimited and ultimate.

Found present individually within each body, it is known implicitly in everything.

And yet it is one single unity, containing all the world.

From 3.8

I know this great principle of personality: pictured as the sun, beyond obscurity....

This all-containing principle is consciousness, known pictured as the self-illuminating sun, beyond all dark obscurity.
3.9

It’s that beyond which there is nothing else, than which there’s nothing smaller, nothing greater.

Like a tree, it stands as one, unmoving, in the place of light.

Beyond it, there is nothing else. There’s nothing smaller, nothing greater. Size does not apply to it, nor any kind of quality.

The manifested universe is like a tree which seems to grow a multiplicity of swaying branches, rustling leaves and flowering blossoms seen by outward sight.

But like a tree, examined at the trunk where it supports itself, the many-seeming world turns out to be a single unity, unmoving in the changeless ground.

This changeless ground is consciousness, where the entire seeming tree of universal happening dissolves in unconditioned light.

By that principle of personality, all this [entire universe] is filled. All things, in truth, are only light pervading all experience of the entire universe.

3.10

That which is above this [world] has no form, and is unaffected by all ill.

Transcending all appearances perceived by body, sense and mind, this principle of consciousness is unattached to any form and unaffected by all ill.

They who know this become deathless. Whoever knows it does not die.

But others go to pain and misery. All others lead a dying life that leads to pain and misery.
From 3.11

Its are all faces, heads, necks. Its home is deep within each being’s heart. It is the all-pervading, blessed Lord.…

All faces, heads and bodies are mere instruments of consciousness, found here in every person’s heart. It is the inner principle of spirit that pervades the world; and thus, it’s worshipped as ‘the Lord’.

3.12

The great Lord is truly this principle of personality: setting goodness and ordered harmony in motion; and ruling the attainment of true purity, as changeless light.

It is the base of changeless light on which is founded order, justice, goodness, harmony, and guidance towards purity and truth.

From 3.13

Measured by thumb, this principle is inner self: living always in the heart of those that have been born; conceived through heart, through thought, through mind.…

Seen in each individual’s own experience, this principle of consciousness is inner self: the living centre of each individual personality. It’s always present, living here within each person’s mind and heart; and it is found by turning thought to question back towards its source: back from the world, through mind and heart, towards the source where thoughts arise.
This [one] principle has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. 
As feelings, thoughts, perceptions change, pure consciousness continues on.

Encompassing the earth on every side, it stands beyond, ten fingers breadth beyond. 
All of them are its instruments, expressing it and thereby acting for its sake; while it remains beyond them all, the common background of the many-seeming world.

This principle alone is all this [world]: 
All that is known, throughout the world, is only known in consciousness.

what has been and what is to be. 
Thus, all that's known must be contained entirely in consciousness; and nothing really is outside.

Pure consciousness is all there is.
It is at once the Lord of deathlessness and what grows by food consumed.

3.16

Its hands and feet are everywhere; eyes, head and face are everywhere; its ears are everywhere.

Encompassing everything in the [entire] world, it stands.

3.17

Lighting all qualities perceived through any faculty, it has itself no faculties that act in any way.

It's chief and Lord, the great refuge of all.
The swan-like spirit, here embodied in the stronghold of nine gates, is at play outside: as the source of all desire, controlling the entire world of fixed and moving things. It is their central principle: their origin and common ground, their guiding light and stable base enabling ordered harmony, their final goal and place of rest.

3.18

The self that’s found embodied here, within each person, is expressed outside as well, in nature’s play of circumstance and happening. Remaining in itself unmoved, it is the inner principle from which all motivation comes. All movements and all standing still, no matter where or when perceived, are understood expressing it; reflecting back to self within.

3.19

It has no feet, yet it keeps up with all that moves. It has no hands, yet it grasps all experience. It’s that which sees and hears; without the faculties of seeing sights and hearing sounds, of objects in some alien world outside itself.

What’s to be known, it knows; It's that which knows whatever's known.

but there is no knower [other than itself] that knows of it. But it is not an object known by anyone who knows of it through faculties and instruments that act towards a world outside.
It is called 'the great, primeval purusha [the principle of personality].'

Conceived as the 'I'-principle, it's what each person really is:

pure, unconditioned consciousness, known prior to all attributes superimposed by partial sight.

3.20

Subtler than subtle, greater than great, is the self:

Far subtler than all subtlety, far greater than all magnitude that senses see or mind conceives, the self is found established here in every living creature's heart.

Set down [here] in the living creature's cave [of heart].

Freed from grief and misery by the Ordainer's grace, one sees that [self], unmixed with purpose and desire,

unmixed with purpose and desire,

as the Lord in all his majesty.

as that which stands beyond all acts of power and greatness in the world.

3.21

This unaging, ageless self of all is what I know,

This same unaging, ageless self is all that's ever truly known:

[seen] going everywhere through its pervading sovereignty.

perceived extending everywhere through its pervading sovereignty.

Those who discuss reality speak of it as ending birth.

It's spoken of as ending birth; for where it's known all time dissolves in deathless continuity.

They speak of it as timeless and continual.
Inner light

What is the essential principle of personality that is called ‘purusha’? In the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, 5.6.1, it is identified as ‘bhāh satyas tasminn antar-hridaye’ or ‘the true light within the heart’.

Translation (from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad) Retelling (from FTU, page 100)

5.6.1

This purusha, the essence of this personality
associated with the mind, that seems to rise from mind,
is the true light is nothing else but light itself,
within the heart, found here within each person’s heart;
like a grain just as the essence of a plant
of rice or barley. that seems to rise and grow from seed
It is the Lord of all, is nothing else but life itself,
the ruler of all: somehow contained within each seed:
governing all this,
all this whatsoever.

Underlying consciousness

In the following translation and retelling from the Kaṭha Upanishad, 5.8-15, ‘purusha’ is further identified as underlying consciousness, continuing through the changes and variations of world and personality.

Translation (from the Kaṭha Upanishad) Retelling (from FTU, pages 31-34)

5.8

This, which is awake What is the individual
in those that sleep, life principle that carries on
is purusha behind the changing mask of
[the inner principle], seeming personality? It is
producing forth desire on desire.

It alone is clear and stainless.
It alone is all reality.
It alone may be called ‘deathless’.
In it, all worlds are based.
Nothing at all transcends it.
This is just that.

5.9-10

Just as one fire, permeating the universe, has become the likeness of form after form;

so too, one self within all beings has the likeness of form after form, and is outside as well.

Just as one air, permeating the universe, has become the likeness of form after form;

Just as one common principle of underlying energy is there throughout the universe, appearing in the different forms that are so differently perceived in different objects and events;

so too, one common principle of underlying consciousness is here throughout experience, appearing in the different forms that are so differently perceived in different personalities.

This underlying consciousness, which different people share alike beneath all their conditionings, is every person’s real self.
so too, one self within all beings has the likeness of form after form, and is outside as well.

5.11

Just as the sun, the whole world’s sight, is not affected by outside, defective sights;
so too, the one self in all beings is not affected by world’s misery.
It is outside.

5.12

It is the one controller, the self within all beings;
In course of time, as different actions, thoughts and feelings come and go, they are co-ordinated by this underlying consciousness of self, which is their common base beneath their seeming differences.
This is the common basis where all different persons, and the various objects that they see, relate.
It is from here that different things and different persons are seen functioning together, in an ordered and intelligible world.

which makes the one seed manifold.
And it is only this, one self of underlying consciousness, whose essence is made manifest in all the many forms of world.
The steadfast see it standing in itself.
To them, as not to others, lasting happiness [is found].

By turning inwards, this one truth is seen, already standing here: as one’s own self. Just this, and only this, brings lasting happiness.

5.13
It is the continuity of changing things; the consciousness of conscious things; the one among the many; that which fulfils desires. The steadfast see it standing in itself. To them, as not to others, lasting peace [is found].

By turning inwards, this one truth is seen, already standing here: as one’s own self. Just this, and nothing else but this, brings lasting peace.

5.14
It is conceived as ‘that is this’; It is conceived as ‘that out there’: as all the world’s reality beneath all mere appearances.

And it’s conceived as ‘this in here’: as ever-present consciousness, by which appearances are known.

But both of these, ‘this’ consciousness and ‘that’ reality, are always present here together: at all times, in everyone’s experience.
Thus being always here together, they can never be distinguished. Though we call them by two names, they are not two, but only one.

the undefinable, supreme happiness. This final non-duality, of knowing self and all that's known, is unconditioned happiness; for here completeness has been found.

How then may I know that, whether it shines [directly] or shines back [reflected]?

5.15

There the sun does not shine, nor moon and stars; nor do these lightning flashes shine; much less this fire.

It does not shine by light of sun or moon or stars or burning fire. It shines alone, by its own light.

5.16

It alone shining, everything shines after it. Without it, nothing else can shine; for it lights all appearances: which shine as its reflected light.

By its light, everything here shines back. Thus all the world is nothing else but the reflected light of self.

As self illuminates the world, it just illuminates itself.

Through all the world's appearances, this self-illuminating light remains always unchanged, unmixed with anything beside itself.

The impersonal basis of personality

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The impersonal basis of personality
The unborn source

In various accounts of creation in the Vedas and the Upanishads, ‘purusha’ is described as the unborn source and the underlying basis of the apparent universe. These accounts contain a curious mixture of myth and philosophy, which can make them seem paradoxical and self-contradictory.

• On the one hand, ‘purusha’ is mythically described as having a personal form: with bodily features such as a head and eyes, and with mental features like thought and will.

• On the other hand, this same ‘purusha’ is philosophically described as unchanging and impersonal: without form or faculties or mind.

These contradictions may be seen in the following translation of the Muṇḍaka Upanishad, 2.1 (specifically in 2.1.2 and 2.1.4). In the retelling reproduced alongside the translation, an attempt is made to avoid some of the apparent contradiction, by a philosophical interpretation of the mythical metaphor. In particular, ‘purusha’ is interpreted as an impersonal principle of unchanging, invariant consciousness: which underlies the changes and variations of personality.

Translation (from the Muṇḍaka Upanishad) (from FTU, pages 190-192)

2.1.1

‘That is this truth. ‘As from a blazing fire, thousands of sparks issue forth, similarly formed; ‘so too, dear friend, from that which does not change, ‘manifold beings are born forth and go back there again.

Retelling

‘As sparks come forth from blazing fire; so too our many seeming lives arise from one same consciousness, shine out as only consciousness, and as they seem to fade away leave nothing else but consciousness.
2.1.2

‘For purusha is divine  
[transcendent and  
self-luminous],  
‘and has no bodied form.  

‘It is outside and inside,  
the unborn [principle]  
of radiant purity:  

‘unmixed with mind,  
unmixed with breath  
and vital faculties.  

‘It transcends  
transcendent  
changelessness.

‘This principle of unmixed light  
shines out unchanged from deep within  
each changing form of bodied life,  
gives life to every breath we take,  
and lights the seeming world outside.

‘It has itself no bodied form.  
It has no birth. It has no breath.  
It has no mind, nor faculties.  
‘It is beyond all we conceive  
as here or there, or anywhere.

2.1.3

‘From it is born:  
‘life-breath and mind  
and all sense-faculties;  

‘the ether, air, light,  
water, and the  
all-supporting earth.

‘From it is born all life, all mind,  
all feeling, thought, perception, sense,  
all principles, all qualities,  
all meanings, all the changing forms  
and all the many varied things  
of which the universe seems made.

2.1.4-5

‘Fire is its head;  
its eyes  
the moon and sun;  
the directions are its ears.  

‘Its speech is  
the revealed Vedas;  
the air, its living breath.  

‘Its heart is all  
the universe.  
From its feet,  
[it is] the earth.

‘The world is known by consciousness;  
the world is seen by consciousness;  
all meanings are but consciousness;  
all qualities are consciousness;

‘and everything that feelings feel,  
or thoughts conceive, or senses see,  
is nothing else but consciousness.

‘The world stands but in consciousness,  
which is each person’s real self.
'For, of all beings,  
it is the self within.

‘From it [comes] fire 
whose fuel is the sun.

‘From the moon [come] 
rain, plants on earth.

‘The male sheds seed 
in the female.

‘From purusha, 
many offspring 
are originated.

2.1.6-8

‘From it [come] 
hymns and chants 
and ritual verses, 
consecrations, sacrifices, 
‘and all ceremonies, 
sacrificial gifts, 
the calendar, 
the sacrificer, 
‘and the worlds 
where the moon 
or where the sun 
illuminates and clarifies.

‘And from it, 
in many ways, 
‘the gods are 
brought forth; 

‘the accomplished 
celestials; 

‘humans, beasts and birds; 

‘the forward and 
reverse life-breaths; 

‘The blazing sun is consciousness; 
the moon’s cool light is consciousness; 
dark clouds and rain are consciousness; 
the solid earth and all the crops 
and food it bears are consciousness.

‘And all the many, varied forms 
of life we creatures seem to lead, 
here born and fed upon the earth, 
are only forms of consciousness.

‘From consciousness comes all we say, 
all that we do, all we express, 
all speech, all poetry, all song, 
‘all acts, intentions, purposes, 
all we perceive or think or feel, 
all energy, vitality, 
all justice, truth and happiness.
'rice and barley;
'intent, faith, truth, chastity and law.

'The seven vital breaths come forth from it; the seven flames, the fuel, the seven offerings;
'these seven worlds where move the living energies laid down [here] in the cave [of the heart], seven by seven.

2.1.9

'From it, all oceans and all mountains; 'Upon this base of consciousness, great-seeming mountains are perceived, and different rivers seem to flow through different regions of the earth to join the oceans’ vast expanse.

'from it flow rivers of all forms. 'In consciousness all forms arise: all object-forms, all forms of life, all solid things, all changing flow, all gross and subtle elements of body and of mind in which we seem to find our inner selves.

'And from it, all plants and the essential flavour by which it stands [associated] with the elements of world. 'For it is the self within.

2.1.10

'Purusha alone is the entire universe, action, intent, complete reality, the deathless ultimate. 'This principle of consciousness, this single principle alone is all there is: all of the world our outward senses seem to see,
'One who knows this, that's seated in the cave [of heart], 'cuts through the knot of ignorance, here [in this life], dear friend…’

'all action in this outside world, all purpose that may be expressed, all meaning that our thoughts conceive, all value that emotion feels.

'This deathless, final principle of consciousness is here and now within each heart: for each of us, the centre of experience.

'Whoever realizes it undoes all seeming ignorance…’

The unmoved mover

In the Kena Upanishad, chapter 1, though the word ‘purusha’ is not explicitly used, there is an interesting description which throws some light on the concept of ‘purusha’: as an unchanging, impersonal principle that is expressed in all movement and all personality.

As shown in the following translation and retelling, there is something of a correspondence here with the Aristotelian concept of the ‘unmoved mover’. This concept is usually taken to be a way of describing ‘God’: as the underlying principle of the entire universe. But Aristotle also used this same concept to describe the ‘soul’: as the underlying principle of each individual personality. Such a complementarity of universal and individual interpretations applies to the Kena Upanishad as well.

Translation (from the Kena Upanishad)

Retelling (from FTU, pages 135-137)

1.1

By what motivated does the mind fly motivated forth?

What motivates mind’s changing show of seeming objects, thoughts, desires?

What makes the mind go out to things that seem to be outside itself?

What sends the mind, in soaring flight, to search for freedom, happiness?
The impersonal basis of personality

By what enjoined does the primal breath of life go forth?

By what motivated do they speak this speech?

Sight, hearing: what intelligence enjoins them?

1.2

It's that which is: the hearing [principle]
of hearing,

the thinking [principle]
of thought,

the very speaking [principle] of speech,

the essential living [principle] of life,

the seeing [principle]
of sight.

Becoming free, the steadfast leave the world behind and come to deathlessness.

From what does mind come down again, to earth: where joy seems always bound to pettiness and suffering?

What joins together various acts – of body, sense and mind – to make each person's individual life?

From what does meaning come: into the things we do, the words we speak, the gestures that our bodies make?

What common light co-ordinates our differing perceptions into fuller knowledge of the world?

1.3

There, seeing does not go; nor does speech, nor mind.

This truth cannot be reached by mind or senses, nor described by speech.

One common, inner principle of consciousness is found in life, in mind and senses, words and acts.

Those who are brave break free from world’s appearances, and realize that self is unmixed consciousness: beyond all seeming change and death.
We do not know, we don’t discern, how it could be taught.

Nor can such faculties explain the way in which it may be taught.

1.4

It is quite other than the known; and further, it’s beyond the unknown.

In truth, the self, as consciousness, is not an object that is known; nor is it anything unknown.

This we have heard from the ancients, who have thus explained it for us.

Its knowledge comes from ancient times. Its knowledge comes before all time; for it must first be known before the very thought of time can rise.

From 1.5

It is not that which rises up from words and speech.

It isn’t something conjured up by words and thoughts; instead, it is the ever-present, knowing ground:

It’s that from which words and speech arise.... from which all thoughts and words arise, on which all thoughts and words depend, to which all thoughts and words return.

From 1.6

It’s that which is not thought by mind;

It isn’t something thought by mind; instead, it is the principle of consciousness that lights the mind: by which all mind and thoughts are known.

[but] that by which the mind is thought, they say....

From 1.7-8

It’s that which is not seen by sight; or heard by listening; instead, it is the knowing principle that lights all sight and sound and sense.

[but] that by which sight is seen....
It’s that which is not heard by hearing; [but] that by which hearing is heard.…

1.9

It’s that which is not breathed by breath or lived by life; [but] that by which breath is breathed and life is lived.

Just that is the reality which you must know; not this [world of objects] to which this [personality] pays heed.

This knowing principle of life is not a partial object, not some little part of world, to which our minds and senses can attend. Instead, it is the common ground of all appearances that show some part of world, perceived by partial body, sense and mind.

This common ground is all there is. It is complete reality, which each appearance shows in part. It’s known in full as knowing self: as pure, unchanging consciousness beneath all personality.

One’s own self

In the following translation and retelling from the Kaṭha Upanishad, 6.17, the individual approach is described: as a focussing of attention inward, towards the essential core of pure, unconditioned self within each personality. This inner principle is to be found most directly by turning attention back into one’s own experience: thus seeking out the true essence of one’s own self, unobscured by the outward mask of ego’s changing attributes.
The impersonal basis of personality

Translation (from the Kaṭha Upanishad) Retelling (from FTU, page 41)

6.17

Measured by thumb, The real self, the inmost
purusha [the principle principle of personality,
of personality] is always present here at heart
is inmost self: in everyone's experience.

living always living always
in the heart in the heart
of those that of those that
have been born.

With steadfast courage, Each petty ego lives in fear
one should choose for its own false security
that out, from one's that clings to passing attributes
own personality;
of changing personality.

[just as the inner] But, putting ego's fears aside
arrow-shaft with steadfast courage, one may choose
[is drawn out] from one's own personality
from [a reed of] that inner, unconditioned core
munja grass. which does not fear or change or die

That one should know, and is one's true security.
as deathless purity.

That one should know, as deathless purity.

The ‘I’-principle

How can one find the essential, impersonal principle of self within one’s
own personality?

In the Prashna Upanishad, 4.9-10, a progressive enquiry is suggested:
from outward faculties of sense, through inward faculties of thought and
discernment, towards the inmost ground of unconditioned, changeless con-
sciousness that underlies all our conditioned and changing faculties.

It is this unconditioned ground that the word ‘purusha’ finally indicates,
as the true principle which each person calls ‘I’.
The minder, the thinker, the creator, the knowing self, purusha [the principle of personality].

It is established in the ultimate, unchanging self.

\[\text{Translation (from the Prashna Upanishad)}\]

\[\text{Retelling (from FTU, pages 177-178)}\]

4.9

For this is the see-er, the toucher, the hearer, the smeller, the taster, the minder, the thinker, the creator, the knowing self, purusha [the principle of personality].

It is the inner principle of all our different faculties. It lights all seeing from within. It's that which is aware in touch. From it, all meaning is expressed; it shows all meaning heard in sound. And it discerns all taste and smell.

It is the seeing principle, the knowing subject of the mind: which carries on through passing states, as thoughts and feelings come and go.

It is the common principle within a person's changing acts.

And thus, for everyone, it is the changeless self that carries on through all the different acts it knows. It's for this self that acts are done.

This principle of knowing self is what each person really is. It's that which everyone calls 'I'.

From 4.10

One who truly comes to know that which is imageless, bodiless, uncoloured, changeless clarity; [such a one] attains to this same changeless ultimate.

It has no image in itself. Nor has it any kind of body, nor conditioned qualities.
[Such a] one, dear friend, then knowing all, becomes all.

As pure, unchanging consciousness, it is the unconditioned ground of all conditioned faculties and all the world that they perceive.

Whoever comes to know this self finds all the world’s reality and realizes everything.
Self

Turning back in

Quite plainly and simply, the Sanskrit word ‘ātman’ is equivalent to the English word ‘self’. This is so both in classical Sanskrit and in the modern Indian languages that derive from Sanskrit. And further, it is so not only in the ordinary, unquestioning usage of everyday life, but also in the reflective usage of philosophical enquiry, where reason turns back to question the very assumptions from which it proceeds.

One such habitual assumption is that a person’s self consists of a body, a set of senses and a mind, which are part of a larger world outside. But then, if self is just an object in the world, how can the world be known by it? Or, if self is not just an object, then what else can it be? And how can it be known?

The word ‘ātman’ is derived from the root ‘an’, meaning ‘to breathe’ or ‘to live’. In the Rig Veda, it has an early form ‘tman’, meaning ‘the vital breath’. In accordance with this derivation and early usage, the word ‘ātman’ describes the self as an inner, spiritual principle of life: quite distinct from the outward personality that is seen to act in the external world.

In the Kātha Upanishad, 4.1, the true nature of the self is described as ‘pratyag-ātman’: which means literally ‘the turned-back self’ or, to elaborate a little, ‘the self, returned to self [to its own true reality]’.

Translation (from the Kātha Upanishad)  Retelling (from FTU, page 26)

4.1

The self-becoming excavated outward-going apertures [of sense].

Thus one sees outwards, not towards the self within.

It seems our senses are created looking out: from self within towards a world that’s known outside.

And so, it seems we only see external objects in the world, as they appear to outward sense.
At first, it seems there is no way to see the self that knows within, the self from which all seeing comes.

But one brave person, seeking deathlessness, turned sight back in upon itself; and saw the self, returned to self [to its own true reality].

Unbodied light

What is there to be found by turning back within?

In the following story from the Chåndogya Upanishad, 8.7-12, a progressive enquiry is described, through the three states of waking, dream and sleep. At each stage, persistent questioning shows up the inadequacy of previous understanding; until the nature of the self is shown at last to be pure consciousness: unconditioned by the gross external body that appears in the waking state, or by the subtle body of imagination and feeling that appears in dream, or even by the absence of body that appears in the seeming nothingness of deep sleep.

Translation (from the Chåndogya Upanishad)

8.7.1

‘That which is self dispels [all] ill;
‘is untouched by age, decay and death and grief;
‘does not hunger, does not thirst.

Retelling (from FTU, pages 126-134)

‘The real self, in each of us, is stainless, undecaying, free from hunger, free from thirst, untroubled in the midst of grief.
'It's that for which all thought and all desire is only truth. 'It has no thought nor wish, but truth. This is the self we cannot help but seek, the truth we seek to understand.

'It's that which is to be sought out; that which we must seek to know.

'Whoever finds and knows that self attains all worlds and all desires.'

'Whoever sees and knows this self gains all the world, and finds the goal of all desires.'

Thus said Prajåpati [Lord of created things].

These words, the gods and demons heard, were said by Lord Prajåpati, the Lord of all created things.

8.7.2

That, both the gods and demons heard. To seek this self that gains the world and finds the goal of all desire, the gods and demons sent their chiefs to question him that made the world.

They said: 'Well, let us seek that self: that self which seeking one attains all worlds and all desires.'

Of the gods, Indra himself went forth; of the demons, Virocana.

Thus Indra, chief among the gods, and demon-king Virocana left home and came, in search of truth, before their Lord Prajåpati.

The two came independently, with sacrificial fuel in their hands, into the presence of Prajåpati.

Each came with fuel grasped in hand, to show their wish that ignorance should burn in sacrificial flame.
Prajāpati said to them:

‘Seeking what, have you been living [here]?’

‘That which is self dispels [all] ill;

‘is untouched by age, decay and death and grief;

‘does not hunger, does not thirst.

‘It’s that for which all thought and all desire is only truth.

‘It’s that which is to be sought out; that which we must seek to know.

‘Whoever finds and knows that self attains all worlds and all desires.’

‘Sir, these words are made known as yours.

‘We live [here] seeking that.’

8.7.3

Thirty-two years they lived the chaste and humble life of student discipline.

They put aside their finery, their shining ornaments and crowns, their life of outward wealth and power.

Thirty-two years they lived instead the humble life of suppliants, who would prepare themselves to learn.

Until at last Prajāpati asked: ‘What is it you wish to know?’

They said: ‘We’ve heard that you describe a stainless, undecaying self by which desires are attained. This self is what we wish to find.’
Prajāpati spoke to them.

‘This that is seen in sight is purusha [the knowing principle of personality].

‘This is the self’, he said.

‘It does not die; nor has it fear. It is the absolute.’

‘Then, Sir, what is it that’s perceived in water, or in a mirror?’

‘Just this itself is perceived within all these’, he said.

‘Look at [your] self in a pan of water and then tell me what it is of self that you don’t know.’

They looked into a pan of water.

Then, Prajāpati said to them:

‘What do you see?’

They said: ‘Sir, we see it all: the self that’s pictured [here], down to the hairs and fingernails.’

‘Then what you seek is close at hand,’ was the reply. ‘For self is seen where sight looks back into itself. It is the changeless absolute, where death and fear do not arise.’

‘But Sir,’ they asked, ‘what is it that a person sees reflected in the stillness of a shining pool or in a mirror’s clarity?’

‘See for yourselves,’ was the reply. ‘One same reality is seen in everything. Go look into a pool of water, and then say what you may find reflected there.’

Thus, Indra and Virocana went to a nearby pool and looked and said: ‘We see of course ourselves, down to our hair and fingernails.’
Next, Prajåpati said to them: ‘Becoming well-adorned, well-dressed, well-groomed, ‘[then] look into the pan of water.’

Becoming well-adorned, well-dressed, well-groomed, they made to look into the pan of water.

Prajåpati now asked them: ‘What do you see?’

They said: ‘Sir, just as we are well-adorned, well-dressed, well-groomed;

‘so too, these [reflections], Sir, are well-adorned, well-dressed, well-groomed.’

‘This is the self,’ he said. ‘It does not die, nor has it fear. It is the absolute.’

They went away, content at heart.

Prajåpati then said to them: ‘Now dress in all your finery, put on your crowns and ornaments; then look again into the pool and say what is reflected there.’

They dressed and looked and said with pride: ‘We see ourselves as we should be, dressed as befits our kingly state.’

Prajåpati’s reply was brief: ‘Whatever you may think you see, all that you see is only self. It is complete reality, where death and fear do not arise.’

Then satisfaction seemed to dawn on Indra and Virocana. It seemed that there was nothing left to learn; and so they took their leave and made their way towards their homes.
8.8.4

Looking after them, Prajāpati said:

‘They go away not having reached or understood the self.

‘Whoever holds this doctrine, be they gods or demons, shall be overcome.’

Quite satisfied at heart, Virocana went to the demons; and to them proclaimed this doctrine:

‘Here self alone is to be magnified; [and] self is to be served.

‘Here magnifying self alone and serving self, ‘one attains both worlds: this world and that beyond.’

8.9.1

But Indra, before he had quite reached the gods, saw this anxiety:

‘Just as this [bodily self] becomes well-adorned in the well-adorned body,

‘[becomes] well-dressed in the well-dressed [body],

But Indra, on his way back home, was troubled by a nagging doubt:

‘If self is body, it enjoys good fortune as the body does.

‘When body is well-dressed … so too is self; when body gains in wealth and power and grace … so too does self.

But, as they left, Prajāpati looked sadly after them and thought:

‘They haven’t understood at all. Their faith clings on to false beliefs. Whoever lives by such belief stays caught in futile misery.

Virocana, triumphantly, went back into his demon world, where he proclaimed: ‘Our selves come first!

‘Let us be strong, increase our power, and take by force what we desire. Let’s feed and clothe and arm ourselves, to satisfy our needs and build our strength to do just as we please.

‘For it befits our demon state that world be bent to serve our needs and wishes, as embodied selves.’
‘[becomes] well-groomed in the well-groomed [body];

‘so too, it becomes blind in the [body that is] blind,

‘lame in the [body that is] lame,

‘crippled in the [body that is] crippled.

‘And, consequent upon the destruction of the body, it is destroyed.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’

‘I can’t be satisfied with this.’

8.9.2-3

Fuel in hand, he came back again.

Thus Indra turned and went again before his Lord Prajāpati, again with fuel grasped in hand to show his unburned ignorance.

Prajāpati said to him:

‘Maghavan, since you went off, content at heart, together with Virocana, seeking what have you returned?’

‘What brings you back? You seemed so pleased when, just a little while ago, you left with King Virocana.’

[Indra] said:

‘Just as this [bodily self] becomes well-adorned in the well-adorned body,

‘[becomes] well-dressed in the well-dressed [body],

‘But, when the body’s eyes are dimmed, when body’s wealth and power fade, when grace departs; then it would seem …

‘that self, like body, must decay, that self, like body, suffers loss of sight and wealth and power and grace.

‘I can’t be satisfied with this.’

Indra explained his troubled doubt, and lived for thirty-two more years a student’s dedicated life;
'[becomes] well-groomed in the well-groomed [body];

'so too, it becomes

'blind in the [body that is] blind,

'lame in the [body that is] lame,

'crippled in the [body that is] crippled.

'And, consequent upon the destruction of the body, it is destroyed.

'I see no satisfaction here.'

'It is just so, Maghavan,' said [Prajāpati]. 'However, I will explain it further to you.

'Live [here] another thirty-two years.'

[Indra] then lived [there] another thirty-two years. To him, [Prajāpati] spoke. until Prajāpati spoke out again, in different words, about the truth that Indra wished to learn:

8.10.1-4

'This which journeys free in dream, enabling mind to magnify;

'Where body’s world dissolves in dream and mind is free, the self shines there.

'It is the deathless, fearless absolute.'
‘this is the self’, he said.
‘It does not die;
nor has it fear.
It is the absolute.’

Then [Indra] went away, content at heart.
But, before he had quite reached the gods, he saw this anxiety:

‘It’s true that even if this body becomes blind, the [dream self] does not become blind;
‘if [the body becomes] lame, the [dream self] does not become lame.

‘Indeed, it doesn’t suffer from the ills of this [body].

‘Not by the slaying of this [body] is the [dream self] slain.

‘Not by the lameness of this [body] is it lame.

‘And yet [in dream], it is as if they kill it, as if they strip it,
‘as if it comes to know unpleasantness, as if it weeps as well.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’

Fuel in hand, he came back again.

And now to Indra, once again, it seemed that he had understood.

He took his leave and started out towards his home. But on his way a further doubt disturbed his mind and brought him back to learn some more;

again with fuel in his hand, by which he showed his wish to burn the ignorance that still remained.
Prajāpati said to him:  
‘Maghavan, since you went off, content at heart, seeking what have you returned?’

Indra said:  
‘It’s true that even if this body becomes blind, the [dream self] does not become blind;  
‘if [the body becomes] lame, the [dream self] does not become lame.  
‘Indeed, it doesn’t suffer from the ills of this [body].  
‘Not by the slaying of this [body] is the [dream self] slain.  
‘Not by the lameness of this [body] is it lame.  
‘And yet [in dream], it is as if they kill it, as if they strip it,  
‘as if it comes to know unpleasantness, as if it weeps as well.  
‘I see no satisfaction here.’

Prajāpati asked: ‘What is it that brings you back again so soon?’

Indra explained: ‘The self in dream may not be bound to suffer those same ills that trouble body in the waking world of outer things.  
‘When outward eyes no longer see and body has thus lost its sight, the self in dreams still seems to see.  
And when gross, outward body dies, perhaps the self lives on in dream.

‘But, even in the state of dreams, the self does not seem fully free.  
In many dreams, self seems to fear, seems to be driven, hunted down; it seems in pain, it seems to weep, it seems to suffer death and grief.

‘I can’t be satisfied with this.’

So Indra stayed for thirty-two more years again; and when this time had passed away, Prajāpati spoke out these words that he might learn:

‘It is just so, Maghavan,’ said [Prajāpati].  
‘However, I will explain it further to you.  
‘Live [here] another thirty-two years.’
[Indra] then lived [there] another thirty-two years.

To him, [Prajāpati] spoke.

8.11.1-2

‘That is this, where one who sleeps perceives no dream, ‘[but is] withdrawn back in to unity and peace.

‘This is the self,’ he said. ‘It does not die; nor has it fear. It is the absolute.’

Then [Indra] went away, content at heart. But, before he had quite reached the gods, he saw this anxiety:

‘This [deep sleep self], such as it is, ‘does not rightly know itself, face to face, as “I am this”; ‘nor [does it know] these things created in the world.

‘It [thus] becomes a something that has gone into complete annihilation.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’
Fuel in hand, he came back again. Prajāpati said to him: ‘Maghavan, since you went off, content at heart, seeking what have you returned?’

[Indra] said: ‘This [deep sleep self], such as it is, ‘does not rightly know itself, face to face, as “I am this”; ‘nor [does it know] these things created in the world. ‘It [thus] becomes a something that has gone into complete annihilation. ‘I see no satisfaction here.’

8.11.3 ‘It is just so, Maghavan,’ he said. ‘However, I will explain it further to you. ‘There’s really nothing else, other than this. ‘Live [here] for five years more.’

And yet again, his wish to burn the ignorance that still remained was shown by fuel in his hand; as he returned, in search of truth, before his Lord Prajāpati.

He told his doubt: ‘The sleeping self can’t know itself by any thought that “I am this” or “I am that” … Nor does it know any object other than itself; and, therefore, it seems quite annihilated … ‘In depth of sleep, there seems to be no self at all. Does this mean self is blank or empty nothingness? How can this be? There’s something here I don’t quite rightly understand.’

Prajāpati said: ‘If you wait another five years here, I shall explain again; though really there is nothing further to explain.’
[Indra] then lived there five years more, which makes one hundred and one years altogether.

This is what they say:
One hundred and one years it was, that Indra lived with Prajāpati.

To him, [Prajāpati] said:

8.12.1

‘In truth, Maghavan, this body is mortal. It is held by death. ‘This body is mortal; it belongs to death. But in it lives the deathless self, which has no body.

‘[But] it is the dwelling place of the bodiless, undying self. ‘Wherever life is mixed with body, like is followed by dislike, pleasure alternates with pain.

‘Whatever’s mixed with body is inevitably held by pleasure and by pain. ‘For existence mixed with body, there’s no true deliverance from pleasure and from pain. ‘Whoever mixes life with body seeks escape in passing pleasures, can’t escape from feeling pain.

‘[But] pain and pleasure really do not touch at all existence that is bodiless. ‘The real self transcends the body, has no need for passing pleasures, is untouched by body’s pain.

So Indra lived there five years more; thus making it a total of one hundred and one years he lived a student’s life, instructed by his teacher, Lord Prajāpati.

When the time came, Prajāpati enlightened Indra with these words:
8.12.2

‘Air is unbodied.
‘Cloud, lightning, thunder, they are unbodied.
‘It is similar to when they rise from space out there; ‘and having reached the higher light, ‘they issue forth into appearance: each through its own form.

8.12.3

‘So too, this peaceful [deep sleep self] rises up from the body; ‘and having reached the higher light, ‘it comes forth into appearance, through its own form.

‘That is purusha, the highest [principle of personality]. ‘There [in dreams], it journeys everywhere about; ‘laughing, playing, taking delight,

‘So too, when forms of seeming mind approach the peace of dreamless sleep, ‘they are dissolved in unobscured, untroubled clarity; ‘revealing self for what it is: ‘pure, bodiless unfading light of unconditioned consciousness.

‘This is the real self, remaining always free: ‘untroubled by the body where we falsely think self has been born,

‘When morning wisps of mist and cloud rise up towards the peace and clarity of sky, ‘they shine revealed as bodiless, dissolving radiant into light.
‘with women or with chariots or with friends;
‘not remembering this body added on by birth.

‘As a draught animal is harnessed to a cart, ‘so too this life [here in the waking world] ‘is harnessed to the body.

8.12.4-5

‘Where sight has settled down into the background continuity pervading [it],
‘that is the seeing principle within each personality.

‘The sense of sight is [just an instrument] for seeing.
‘Next, that which knows “I can smell this”, that is the self.

‘The sense of smell is [just an instrument] for smelling.

‘and where self seems to laugh, eat, play, to seek out pleasure, love and happiness.

‘But where the self is thought to be encumbered by the body’s needs, ‘there life seems caught in bondage: like a horse that’s tethered to a cart.

‘The eye is just an instrument for seeing sights.
‘The ear is just an instrument for hearing sounds.

‘The voice is just an instrument for speaking words.
‘The mind is just an instrument for thinking thoughts

‘and dreaming up a subtle world from feeling and desire.
'And that which knows
“I can say this”,
that is the self.

'The voice is
[just an instrument]
for speaking.

'And that which knows
“I can hear this”,
that is the self.

'The sense of hearing is
[only an instrument]
for listening.

'And that which knows
“I can think this”,
that is the self.

'The mind is its
divine sight.

'That [self] is truly this.

'Seeing these desires
through the divine
sight of the mind,

'it is at peace
and takes delight
in everything.

8.12.6

'In the world of
expanded
[consciousness],

‘these who are gods
pay heed to that
which is this self.

‘Therefore all worlds
and all desires
are held by them.

‘But, in each one of us,
it is the self that knows

‘the sights that seeing sees,
the sounds that hearing hears,
the words that speaking speaks,

‘the thoughts that thinking thinks,
and all the subtle worlds
that dreaming dreams
from feeling and desire.

‘This knowing self,
this common core
of unconditioned consciousness
within each personality,

‘is that immortal absolute
to which the gods pay heed,
by which they gain their power.
‘One who finds and knows the self attains all worlds and all desires.’

Thus said Prajāpati.

‘This very self, within us all, is what we seek in all of our desires.’

[Thus] said Prajāpati.

‘Whoever sees and knows this self gains all the world, and finds the goal of all desire.’

The self in everyone

What common, universal truth is to be found by a subjective enquiry into one’s own self?

The following story from the Chāndogya Upanishad, 5.11-18, describes the concept of ‘ātman vaishvānara’, which can be translated as ‘the universal self’ or ‘the self in everyone’. As these two translations imply, there are two ways of interpreting this concept.

• The first is objective and cosmological: as the self of a universal being that somehow includes all objects in the entire world.

• The second is subjective and philosophical: as a common, impersonal principle that is each person’s real self. This common principle of self is unconditioned consciousness, beneath all seeming differences of body, senses and mind.

As translated and interpreted below, the story moves from various cosmological approaches to a more philosophical understanding of universality: as the subjective ground of underlying consciousness, beneath all the differing appearances of different people’s experience.

Translation (from the Chāndogya Upanishad) (from FTU, pages 109-110)

Retelling

From 5.11.6

They [the learned householders] said [to King Ashvapati Kaikeya]:

‘...This same universal self which you directly know, tell us of just that.’

King Ashvapati Kaikeya was once approached by a small group of learned householders, who asked:

‘Sir, we have heard that you have knowledge of a “universal” self. Could you explain this self to us?’
From 5.12.1

[The king asked:] ‘...What do you heed as [this] self?’

Just heaven, your majesty.’…

King Ashvapati, in reply, said: ‘Tell me, first, just what you think this “universal” self might be.’

One thought this self was starry heaven, which rules what happens in the world.

From 5.13.1

... Just the sun, your majesty.’…

Another thought this self was sun, illuminating world below.

From 5.14.1

... Just air, your majesty.’…

A third believed this self was air, the subtle breath of qualities.

From 5.15.1

... Just space, your majesty.’…

A fourth believed this self was space, pervading all that it contains.

From 5.16.1

... Just water, your majesty.’…

A fifth believed this self was water, flowing into changing forms.

From 5.17.1

... Just earth, your majesty.’…

The sixth believed this self was matter, constituting everything.

5.18.1

He said to them: King Ashvapati said to them:

‘You, who are these indeed, ‘In all these different, partial views of one same “universal” self, you draw upon experience as if you know this self as something different from each one of you.

‘take in nourishment [from experience]”
'knowing this self in everyone ‘and as the unmixed intensity of self-discerning thought;

‘But, surely, “universal” self is just that self which all of us see in ourselves in different ways.

‘But [of] one who heeds this self in everyone, ‘as the measure of all measures,

‘Beneath these different points of view, just what is it that’s really here, shared in common by us all?

‘Beneath the many differences through which our bodies, minds and senses view the world, upon what common measure of all measured things do we rely, in order that such differences may be compared?

‘Our knowledge of the world is built by joining different measurements. But on what base? Is there in us one common base of measurement: to which each one of us refers for everything that’s measured here in anyone’s experience?

‘This common base of measurement is found by turning thought back in: to knowing self, from which thought comes. This is the self in each of us.

‘It’s the unmixed intensity of thought that’s known as thought alone: where knowing self is objectless, pure consciousness that knows all things as nothing else but self alone.

‘For one who knows this, all experience everywhere is drawn upon: whatever worlds may seem conceived, whatever beings may appear, however seen by seeming selves....'
The rider in a chariot

How can the inner, real self be distinguished from the outward, seeming selves that appear in our conditioned and varying personalities?

In the following translation and retelling from the Kaṭha Upanishad, 3.1,3-4, apparent personality and inner self are distinguished through the metaphor of a chariot.

Like a chariot, the apparent personality moves about and changes in a moving and changing world. The inner self is like the rider in a chariot; it is the living principle for whose sake the personality changes and moves from place to place. But known within, from its own point of view, self stays the same and is in truth unmoved; as scenes of passing world go by, just like the scenes a chariot passes through.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Translation</strong> (from the Kaṭha Upanishad)</th>
<th><strong>Retelling</strong> (from FTU, pages 15-18)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
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<td>‘There are two [spoken of as] drinking the justice of moral action in the world;</td>
<td>‘Within each heart, there seem to be two selves, experiencing the truth of moral action in the world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘[as] penetrated in the cave [of heart], in the ultimate place of the ultimate;</td>
<td>‘Of these two selves, one is described as a mere shadow or reflection of the other self: the real self, which shines by its own light, by its own pure intensity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘[as] shadow-image and blazing intensity.</td>
<td>‘The shadow self is seeming ego, acting in a world outside, enjoying good and suffering ill.</td>
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<td>‘Knowers of reality speak [thus],</td>
<td>‘Behind appearances of ego, real self is consciousness: unmixed with personality, unconditioned by the world.</td>
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<td>‘as also those of the five [household] fires and those of the three Naciketas [fires].</td>
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3.3-4

‘And also know
intelligence
as chariot-driver;

‘with mind
as just the reins.

‘The faculties of sense
are horses, it is said;

‘and objects are
their paths of travel.

‘Know self
as one who rides
within a chariot;

‘then body is
only the chariot.

‘If changing personality
is thought of as a chariot,
then self is living consciousness
which rides within the chariot.

‘Seen from outside, the chariot takes
the knowing self from place to place;
and thus moves on, for sake of self,
expressing purpose and desire.

‘But, as it knows itself within,
the self remains unmoved, unchanged;
while world and chariot move and change.

‘As known from self, the world goes by
in changing scenes of passing show,
like scenes a chariot passes through.

Just as a chariot is but part
of changing world in which it moves,
so too each personality
is but an object in the world.

‘A moving chariot’s wheels turn round,
its body suffers strain and shock.
So too, a person's body suffers
change and harm, and gets worn out.

‘And also know
intelligence
as chariot-driver;

‘with mind
as just the reins.

‘The faculties of sense
are horses, it is said;

‘and objects are
their paths of travel.

Just as a chariot’s horses pull
it on to where it goes; so too
a person is pulled on by
sensual faculties and appetites,
towards the objects of desire.

Just as a chariot’s horses are
controlled by reins; so too, are
sensual faculties and appetites
controlled by the intent of will.

‘And as the driver of a chariot
pulls upon the reins, to guide
the chariot for the traveller’s sake;
'so too, the intellect and heart
think thoughts and feel emotions that
direct the will, all for the sake
of knowing self that lives within.

'The chariot’s body, horses, reins
and driver are all changing objects
acting in an outside world,
of which they are but little parts.

'So too, a person’s body, senses,
will and intellect and heart
are changing objects, each of which
acts as a partial piece of world.

'The self within is consciousness.
Known truly, as it knows itself,
it does not move; it does not change.
It is no part of changing world.
It only knows; it does not act.

'Its knowledge is no kind of act;
its very being is to shine.
It shines itself, by its own light;
and it is nothing else but light.

'It's this pure light of consciousness
that lights up all appearances,
as body, sense and mind seem to
perceive a world of seeming things.

'Self
and mind
and senses
juxtaposed
‘are “the enjoyer”,
say the wise....'

'By false identity of self
as changing body, sense and mind,
the consciousness of knowing self
seems mixed with body’s sensual acts
and with the acts of thought and feeling
carried out by changing mind.

'And thus, confusing changeless self
with changing personality,
experience seems conditioned by
a physical and mental world
of forms and names and qualities
that bodies sense and minds conceive.
How is experience known by self?

The following passage occurs in both the Shvetâsvatara Upanishad (4.6-7) and the Muṇḍaka Upanishad (3.1.1-2). It distinguishes two kinds of experience.

• In the first kind of experience, knowledge is mixed with the actions of conditioned personality. And accordingly, the experience is conditioned by changing enjoyments and sufferings that result from the successes and failures of such personal action.

• In the second kind of experience, knowledge is pure illumination: quite unattached to any actions or consequences in the changing world. Accordingly, the experiencer is not an enjoyer or a sufferer, but a purely detached witness: quite unaffected by anything that happens in the conditioned world.

Where self is falsely identified as a personal ego, consisting of body or senses or mind, it seems to know experience in the first way: as a conditioned enjoyer and sufferer. But where the self is understood to know experience in the second way, as a completely detached witness; there the false identification of ego is dissolved, and the true nature of self is realized. Thus known entirely unmixed with any conditioned action or enjoyment, it turns out to be the final goal of love that motivates all actions, and the underlying source of happiness that shines out in all enjoyments.

As shown below, the same passage has been retold rather differently, in the differing contexts of the Shvetâsvatara and Muṇḍaka Upanishads.

‘Through such conditioned consciousness
a person seems to taste the fruit
of good and bad experiences:
enjoying what seems to be good
and suffering that which seems ill…’
Translation (from the Shvetāśvatara Upanishad) (from FTU, pages 253-254)

4.6

Two birds in close companionship are perched upon a single tree.

Of these, one eats and relishes the fruit.

The other does not eat, but just looks on.

Retelling (from FTU, pages 253-254)

4.6

These principles, of inner ‘soul’ and consciousness, are like two birds conceived to live together here, on nature’s tree of happenings.

Of these two birds, one eats and tastes the fruit, and thus becomes affected by its qualities. The other does not eat, but just looks on, unmoved by nature’s changing acts.

4.7

On the same tree, a person in depression grieves, deluded by non-possession.

When someone [thus deluded] sees the other, as what one [truly] loves, as Lord [of all], as one’s [own] majesty, that someone is thus freed from grief.

Retelling (from FTU, pages 196-197)

4.7

On this same tree, a person gets depressed and suffers grief: deluded by a sense of seeming helplessness, and feeling thus quite dispossessed.

But when one sees what’s truly loved – as that which stands beyond all else, as one’s own boundlessness, from where help comes, where everything belongs – there one is freed from misery.

Translation (from the Mundaka Upanishad)

3.1.1

‘Two birds in close companionship are perched upon a single tree.

Retelling (from FTU, pages 196-197)

3.1.1

‘What really is a person’s self that lives in body, senses, mind?
'Of these, one eats and relishes the fruit. The other does not eat, but just looks on.

'It seems to relish pleasant things; it seems to suffer misery.

'It seems a separate ego in an outside world, conditioned by the fruits of world's activities.

'Such ego, acting in the world, enjoying pleasure, suffering pain, is just a little piece of world, consuming fruits of worldly acts.

'It's just an object in the world. It cannot really be the self.

'The self is that in us which knows.

'When body seems to know the world, it is called “self”. But when it seems that body is an instrument through which perceiving senses know, then senses seem to be the self.

'Next, when it seems that senses are but instruments of knowing mind, then mind appears to be the self.

'And finally, when mind is seen to be a mere activity which forms appearances of world,

'the self is known for what it is: pure consciousness, which does not act but only lights appearances.

'This light is no activity which starts or runs its course or ends or is conditioned by the world.

'As world’s appearances are formed by changing mind, they come and go; but every one of them is lit by consciousness, which always must remain, throughout experience.
3.1.2

‘On the same tree, a person in depression grieves, deluded by the non-possessing [aspect of the real self, which does not act and has no powers or faculties].

‘When someone [thus deluded] sees [beyond ego] the other, [real self]:

‘as what one [truly] loves, as Lord [of all], as one’s [own] majesty;

‘that someone is thus freed from grief....’

‘Appearing caught in changing acts, a person gets depressed and suffers misery: misunderstanding as poor ego’s helplessness the non-possessing nature of the real self, which does not act and has no powers or faculties.

‘But where the self is truly seen, transcending ego: as the unconditioned centre of all life, all love, all happiness; there one is free, from ego’s self-inflicted pettiness and misery....’

Cleansing the ego

How can the limitations and partialities of the conditioned ego be transcended, in order to attain a complete and impartial knowledge of undistorted truth?

In the Shvetāśvatara Upanishad, 2.14-15, the ego is compared to a dirty mirror, which shows up as an obscuring obstacle to the light that it reflects. But, by understanding ego’s falsities and hence clearing them away, the ego ceases to be an obstacle and becomes instead a means to truth. For it then dissolves into the very light of self that it reflects, thus revealing the ultimate truth of all reality.
And by the nature of the self, as by a lamp,

2.15

A person’s body, sense and mind are only instruments through which perceptions of the world appear. They do not know in their own right; for their perceptions shine by light of knowing self that lives within.

Light is the nature of the self. Its very being is to shine: as self-illuminating light.

It is the light of consciousness, which lights perceived appearances and thus illuminates the world.
one who is joined with it can see, right here, the truth of all reality: unborn, unchanging and completely pure, through all [subsidiary] truths.

[Thus] knowing God, one finds release: through all constraining bonds and ties.

**Detachment and non-duality**

What truth of world is realized by discerning the true nature of self? This question raises an inherent paradox, as described in the following translation and retelling from the Shvetåshvatara Upanishad, 5.7-14.

Truth is sought by making distinctions, in particular by distinguishing truth from falsity. However, the purpose of these distinctions is to find an underlying unity, beneath the contradictions of appearance that result from falsity. So, wherever truth is sought, there is this inherent paradox: of distinction seeking its own end in unity.

By distinguishing the true nature of the self, one is meant to come to the end of all distinctions: in the non-dual realization that the entire world is nothing else but the reality of one’s own self. That world and self, though seeming two, are only one.

**Translation (from the Shvetåshvatara Upanishad)**

5.7

The doer of actions which bear fruit is that [in us] which is conditioned by qualities.

**Retelling (from FTU, pages 259-261)**

Each doer acts and meets reaction, and thus gets to be conditioned by resulting qualities.
That [doer] is as well the implied enjoyer of its own accomplishments.

That [doer in us] is what assumes all forms of world.

It's that to which the three qualities are attributed.

It's that [in us] which follows the three paths.

It is life's ruling principle, journeying throughout by its own actions.

5.8

Represented [in one's person] by the measure of a thumb, it appears [by its own light] just like the sun.

Seen by virtue of the mind, it's that which is associated with ego and imagination that follow in its wake.

But seen by virtue of itself, As seen by virtue of itself, it's like a point, dimensionless: beyond all measure and compare, with nothing else beyond itself.

Each doing personality experiences conditioning that follows from its previous acts.

Accordingly, it's the enjoyer of its past accomplishments, as it is shaped through various forms of seeming world that it perceives.

In every one of us, the doer is the ruling principle of life that journeys on through time by its own actions in the world.

The individual self appears, in every person, like the sun.

It shines by its own light, and thus illuminates the seeming world.

As seen by virtue of the mind, it gets associated with false ego's pettiness of thought and will and wishful fantasy.

As seen by virtue of itself, it's like a point, dimensionless: beyond all measure and compare, with nothing else beyond itself.
as represented
by the measure of
a [dimensionless] point
at the tip of a sharp spike,
it is beyond [all
measure and compare],
with nothing else
beyond itself.

5.9
The living principle of
personality may be perceived
as quite infinitesimal:
as but a part
of the point
of a hair,
divided hundredfold
a hundred times.
And yet, from it
arise relationships
and capabilities
that extend unlimited
to all infinity.

5.10
Essentially,
it is not male
or female,
nor is it
even neuter.
Whatever body
it assumes,
through that
it's noticed,
cherished, cared for
and watched over,
[with concern and love].

No gender qualifies its life.
It is not male. Nor is it female.
Nor has it some neuter gender
in between, describing it
as somehow lacking vital life.
But, through the personalities
superimposed on it by us,
it's what we cherish, what we care
for, what we watch and look for with
concern, in those we come to love.
5.11
Through delusions of imagination, touch and sight, the self [seems] born and [seems to] grow, nourished by the food and water it receives.

But the embodied [principle] continues on in states of change, successively assuming forms that follow from past acts.

5.12
Seen through the attributes of [various] acts, the embodied [principle] selects a great variety of gross and subtle forms, along with their respective qualities.

But seen through its own attributes as self, as the co-ordinating basis and the unifying cause of [all] these [various forms],

Fooled by its own delusions of imagination, feeling, sight, the ego takes itself to be a personality that has been born and grows in many ways, through nourishment that it receives.

But self, in truth, is quite impersonal: as the unborn, unchanging principle that’s always here, in everyone’s experience, within each personality.

As body journeys through the world, self carries on through states of change:

and thus appears to be a ‘soul’, successively assuming forms of changing personality that follow on from previous acts.

Seen through the changing attributes of mind’s and body’s various acts, it seems that the embodied self takes on a great variety of gross and subtle qualities to form a personality.

But, seen through its inherent nature, as the changeless, common centre where all attributes are joined;
it is beyond all else, the self is known beyond all else, with nothing else with nothing else beyond itself.

5.13

Unbegun and endless
in the midst
of a chaotic world
of mixed-up things,

it’s that which takes
on many forms
to issue forth
as everything.

Here, in the midst of a
chaotic-seeming world of birth and death,
it’s begun and infinite:

as it appears to take on the
variety of changing forms
that seemingly condition it,
creating the appearances
of everything that seems perceived.

Thus it’s the one reality
containing all the universe.

[Thus] knowing God
one finds release:
through all
constraining
bonds and ties.

5.14

It’s grasped only by being it:
by coming to
one’s own reality.

It’s grasped only by being it:
by looking back into one’s self,
from where sight comes, and thus returning
to one’s own reality.

It is called ‘bodiless’,
for no body
in the world
can be described
as its sole resting place.

It is called ‘bodiless’; for it
is not attached or limited
to any body in the world.
It is the blessed Lord who makes things happen or not happen in the world.

And it is God who makes creation and its parts.

They who know it have relinquished petty personality.

It is the source of love, from which all doing and undoing comes.

It is the principle of light, from which creation issues forth.

Whoever knows it leaves behind all petty personality.
Happiness

Value

What is the goal of ‘happiness’ that people seek?

In the Kaṭha Upanishad, 2.1-2, a distinction is drawn between the short-term attraction (‘preyas’) of changing enjoyments and the long-term value (‘hita’) of lasting happiness.

Translation (from the Kaṭha Upanishad) Retelling (from FTU, page 11)

2.1-2

‘What is of value is one thing; what’s just agreeable is another.

‘These different purposes both bind a person.

‘Of the two, it is well for someone who takes what is of value.

‘But one who chooses merely what’s agreeable [thus] falls away from the intended aim.

‘What is of value and what is agreeable come to a person.

‘Someone who has strength of mind considers and distinguishes them.

‘So,’ said the stranger, ‘you’ve made a distinction. On the one hand, body, senses and mind are attracted by a variety of changing purposes and enjoyments. On the other hand, as these changing attractions keep dying away, they express a continuing principle of value: which is the final, undying basis of all physical, sensual and mental desires....’
'A strong-minded person chooses what’s of value as against what’s just agreeable.

'Someone weak and foolish chooses the agreeable, out of attachment and complacency…'

Outward desire

According to the Kaṭha Upanishad, 4.2, lasting happiness is to be found by turning back from outward-going desire, towards a spiritual basis of inner stability within each personality. Unlike the changing and dying objects of outward desire, this inner basis of stability is quite untouched by all the change and death that is perceived in the external world.

Translation (from the Kaṭha Upanishad)  Retelling (from FTU, page 27)

4.2

The infantile go after outward desires; [and thus] they go into the snare of widespread death.

But the steadfast, realizing deathlessness, do not seek stability here among unstable things.

Outward desires lead the mind into the widespread snare of death: which rules this world of seeming things that come to be and pass away.

But those of steadfast courage do not rest content with the pretence of relative stability, sought here among unstable things. Instead, they question all pretence until true certainty is found: beyond the reach of change and death, beyond all trace of fear and doubt.
Kinds of happiness

What basis of stability can be found by turning attention back within? In the following translation and retelling from the Taittiriya Upanishad, 2.8-9, different kinds of conditioned happiness are described as partial and inadequate manifestations of an essential, unconditioned source that lights them from inside. And this essential source of unconditioned happiness may be directly found by drawing back, through seeming personality, to consciousness within.

Translation (from the Taittiriya Upanishad)  
Retelling (from FTU, pages 226-229)

From 2.8

... Let us suppose that there is a young man: accomplished, educated, the most dynamic, steadfast and strongest of young men.

Let us suppose that this whole earth is full of wealth for him.

[Consider] that one [unit of] human happiness.

A hundred of these [units of] human happiness amount to one [unit of] happiness for human gandharvas [celestial spirits],

and for one who’s learned the sacred texts unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these [units of] human gandharva happiness

Imagine someone who is young, who’s open, honest, full of fun, well-educated, sensitive, alert, adjusted, healthy, strong, with all the comforts wealth can bring.

Take this as ‘normal’ happiness.

Much more intense is happiness of celebration, breaking free from personal conditioning that limits ordinary life.
amount to one
[unit of] happiness
for divine gandharvas
[celestial spirits],

and for one who’s learned
the sacred texts
unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these
[unit of] divine
gandharva happiness
amount to one
[unit of] happiness for
the ancestors in their
long-lasting worlds,

and for one who’s learned
the sacred texts
unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these
[unit of] the ancestors’
happiness amount to
one [unit of] happiness for
gods so born by birth,

and for one who’s learned
the sacred texts
unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these
[unit of] the happiness
of gods so born
amount to one
[unit of] happiness for
those who have risen
to be gods by work,

and for one who’s learned
the sacred texts
unaffected by desire.

And more than this, there’s happiness
of settled, long experience:
which goes on bringing in rewards
for relatively many years.

But this depends on happiness
of cultivated faculties
inherited through family
and breeding in society.

And further, there is happiness
of capabilities achieved
by one’s own work and discipline.
A hundred of these [units of] the happiness of gods by work amount to one [unit of] happiness for the [higher] gods, and for one who’s learned the sacred texts unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these [units of] the happiness of [higher] gods amount to one [unit of] happiness for Indra [chief of gods], and for one who’s learned the sacred texts unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these [units of] Indra’s happiness amount to one [unit of] happiness for Brihaspati [the creator], and for one who’s learned the sacred texts unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these [units of] Brihaspati’s happiness amount to one [unit of] happiness for Prajåpati [the Father], and for one who’s learned the sacred texts unaffected by desire.

Supporting this is happiness of mastering one’s faculties: co-ordinating and controlling them, towards one’s chosen goals.

All this is based on happiness of aspiration to the truth, beyond all mere appearances of seeming objects in the world.

And greater still is happiness of coming to creation’s source from which appearances arise.
A hundred of these [units of] Prajapati's happiness amount to one [unit of] the happiness of brahman [complete reality], and of one who’s learned the sacred texts unaffected by desire.

It’s what this is, in a person; and what that is, in the sun.

It is one.

One who knows thus leaves this [seeming] world behind, withdrawing into this self that’s made from food, withdrawing into this self that’s formed of living energy, withdrawing into this self that just consists of mind, withdrawing into this self that only is discerning consciousness, and withdraws into this self that’s nothing else but happiness.

But none of these compares at all with unconditioned happiness: where all desires are dissolved, and simple truth is realized that consciousness is all there is, with self and object known as one.

It’s consciousness that lights appearances, here in a person’s mind.

And this same consciousness makes known all objects in the seeming world perceived by body, sense and mind.

Thus, inward consciousness of mind and outward consciousness of world, though seeming two, are only one.

As this is known, appearances of seeming world are left behind: withdrawing first through body-self; then through the self of living energy beneath the body’s acts; then through the self of mind beneath the purposes of living acts; then through discerning consciousness beneath the judgements of the mind; and thus at last to unconditioned happiness of real self, where changeless consciousness is known at one with all reality.
On that there also is this verse:

2.9

‘It’s that] from which all words turn back together with the mind, unable to attain [it].

‘It is the happiness of complete reality.

‘One who knows [it] has no fear of anything.

‘Such a one does not burn:
“Why have I not done right?”

“Why have I done wrong?”

‘One who is thus a knower [of complete reality]
‘delivers up these two [good and ill] as [one’s own] self.

‘For truly, one who thus knows liberates them both, as [nothing else but] self.’

Such is the teaching.

One common goal

Through all our differing desires for various different things, is there some common principle that we all seek?
In the following passage from the Kena Upanishad, 4.4-6, this common principle is described as ‘tad-vanam’: which literally means ‘that-desired’ or, to elaborate a little, ‘that which all desire seeks’.

**Translation (from the Kena Upanishad)**

**4.4**

Of that there is this teaching. It is this, which is said to have flashed out and vanished back in lightning. This with regard to the gods.

**4.5**

Now with regard to self: it is that to which this mind moves as it were; and by it this [mind’s] conception carries on remembering.

Subjectively, seen where the mind turns back to self from which it comes, truth is at once both goal and base. It's that to which all mind aspires, and that on which all mind depends: as it appears to carry on through changing time, enabling world to be conceived by seeming mind from fragments of past memory.

**4.6**

It is just that called ‘tad-vanam’ ['that-which-is-desired'].

Truth is just that which is desired beneath all seeming goals of mind.
It is to be heeded as ‘tad-vanam’.

He who thus knows this, him all beings seek.

It's that which all desire seeks, and it should thus be understood: beneath the many different forms imagined by our partial minds to represent the truth they seek.

Whoever knows this truth of love is loved, in truth, by everyone.

Love

In the following passage from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad (4.5.6-7), the common goal of all desire is identified as each person’s real self.

Translation (from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)  Retelling (from FTU, pages 95-96)

4.5.6

‘It isn’t really for love of a husband that a husband becomes loved.

‘What does a wife love in her husband? Is it just that he’s a husband?

If it’s that, it isn’t love. All she can love in him is self.

‘But it’s for love of the self that a husband becomes loved.

‘And when a husband loves his wife, is it love if she’s just a wife?

All he can love in her is self.

‘It isn’t really for love of a wife that a wife comes to be loved.

‘So also love of children, friends, living creatures, places, objects, love of power, love of knowledge.

‘But it’s for love of the self that a wife comes to be loved.

‘It isn’t really for love of sons that sons come to be loved.

All that’s loved is only self.
‘But it’s for love of the self that sons come to be loved.


‘Essentially, it is the self that’s to be seen, that’s to be heard, and thought about and reflected on.

‘Maitreyi, when self is seen, is heard, is thought about, is reflected on,

‘then all this [entire universe] is known.

4.5.7

‘Brahminhood forsakes one who knows of brahminhood as other than the self.

‘Nobility forsakes one who knows of nobility as other than the self.

‘When this self is seen and known, then all the world is truly known and there is nothing else to know.

‘Where learning is not realized as self, such learning cannot last. Where power is not realized as self, nor can such power stay.
'The worlds forsake one who knows of worlds as other than the self.

'The gods forsake one who knows of gods as other than the self.

'The Vedas forsake one who knows of the Vedas as other than the self.

'Beings forsake one who knows of beings as other than the self.

'Everything forsakes one who knows of everything as other than the self.

'This brahminhood, this nobility, these worlds, these gods, these Vedas, these beings,

all of this, is what self is.…'

Desire’s end

In the following translation and retelling from the Brihadārañyaka Upanishad, 4.3.21, each person’s real self is described as the desireless and unaffected goal of love: where all desires and dissatisfactions come to end.

Translation (from the Brihadārañyaka Upanishad) Retelling (from FTU, page 87)

4.3.21

‘That is truly one’s own nature: ‘This is truly

‘this that is beyond desire, ‘When unity has been achieved with someone who is truly loved, all care dissolves in love itself, which shines as peace and happiness.'
‘free from ill, untouched by fear.
‘Just as a man, in close embrace with a beloved wife,
‘does not know any outside thing, nor anything within;
‘so too a person, in close touch with his own knowing self,
‘does not know any outside thing, nor anything within.
‘This is truly one’s own nature:
‘where desire is attained,
‘with all desire returned to self, desireless, beyond all grief.…’

‘Thus, happiness of love attained shows self and world as really one, beyond all false duality.…’

**Freedom**

In the following translation and (much adapted) retelling from the Chândogya Upanishad, 8.1.5 – 8.3.2, happiness is described as a realization of the self’s true freedom: from the apparent bondage of egotistical desire.
Translation (from the Chândogya Upanishad)

From 8.1.5-6

... It's rather like those people here who only follow where directed. They live their lives dependent on pursuing some objective that desire happens to drive them towards,

be it a kingdom or a plot of land.

Just as here [in this gross world of body],

the state that has been won through work gets played out and passes on;

so also there [in the subtle world of mind],

the state that has been won through virtue gets played out and passes on.

Those who go on from here, ignorant of self and of these true desires,

are not free to move as they desire in all states.
But those who go on from here, knowing self and these true desires, are quite free to move as they desire in all states.

8.2.10

Each objective that one comes to desire, each desire one desires, rises up from one’s own conception.

With that desire attained, one is exalted and thus comes to happiness.

When an object is desired, ego feels that self is lacking something to be found outside. Consciousness thus seems divided; mind appears, dissatisfied.

When an object of desire is attained; then, for the moment, restless ego has subsided, self seems to have been completed, consciousness seems unified.

Thus, truth of self, within the heart, shines out as peace and happiness.

8.3.1-2

Those are these true desires, overlaid with falsity.

Though they are true in themselves, there is an overlay of falsity.

For, whatever of one’s [friends or possessions] departs from here, one does not get to see that [friend or possession] here.

But though achievement of desire brings a state of happiness, such happiness can never last;

for ego rises up again, inherently dissatisfied, and seeks some further alien thing.

All of ego’s life and actions are dependent on the self; which, through seeming self-deception, ego does not understand.
Yet, whatever one may long for,
of those alive here or departed,
and whatever else one wants but doesn’t get;
all that one finds by going here [into one’s own self].

For they are here: one’s true desires, overlaid by falsity.

Just as those who do not know the land may journey back and forth repeatedly over a buried golden treasure,
and yet not discover it;
so also all these creatures go, day after day, into the state of absolute, uncompromised reality, and do not find it.

For they are kept from [seeing] it by [self-deceiving] falsity.

**The ground of all reality**

How does the conditioned world relate to the unconditioned happiness of real self?

In the following passage from the Taittirīya Upanishad, 3.6, happiness is described as the complete reality that underlies all experience of the entire
world. For this ‘happiness’ is the final principle of value which motivates all perceptions, thoughts and feelings; and it thus always underlies whatever is perceived or thought about or felt, through all experience of the apparent world.

**Translation** (from the Taittiriya Upanishad) **Retelling** (from FTU, page 233)

From 3.6

‘Happiness is complete reality.

‘For it is essentially from happiness, that these beings are born.

‘By happiness, born beings live;

‘[and] into happiness those that depart dissolve.’…

‘Reality is nothing else but unconditioned happiness:

‘where falsity has been removed from consciousness, which is thus known at one with all reality.

‘From unconditioned happiness, rise all of our experiences.

‘On it, each one of them depends.

‘It's what they want. It's where they go.

‘It is the self that knows in us and all we ever really know.’

**Non-duality**

In the following translation and retelling from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad, 4.3.32, happiness is described as non-dual consciousness: where all the reality of world is known as self, and there is no division left between what knows and what is known.

**Translation** (from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad) **Retelling** (from FTU, page 89)

From 4.3.32

‘The fluctuating ocean [of the seeming world],

‘with all its many, changing waves,

‘As all waves are only water, so all seeming things are self, which knows all things as but itself, as undivided happiness.’
'turns out to be
one single see-er,
without duality.

'This is the state
of the absolute....

'This is one's
highest attainment.

'This is one's
highest fulfilment.

'This is one's
highest state.

'This is one's
highest happiness.

'[All] other things,
that have but come to be,
subsist upon
only a measure
of this happiness.....'
The three states

The syllable ‘Om’ is often used as a mantra or chanted sound in traditional practices of ritual and meditation. But it is also a condensed formula for a reasoned, philosophical enquiry into the three states of waking, dream and deep sleep: as described in the following translation and retelling of the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Translation</strong> (from the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad)</th>
<th><strong>Retelling</strong> (from FTU, pages 202-206)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The syllable ‘Om’ is all this.</td>
<td>The word that's spoken out as ‘Om’,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Its further explanation is:</td>
<td>when rightly understood, shows all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was, what is and what will be; all that</td>
<td>experience: all that is, all that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will be; all that is described by just the</td>
<td>ever was, all that will be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syllable ‘Om’.</td>
<td>And thus it shows unchanging truth;</td>
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<tr>
<td>And all else, transcending threefold time,</td>
<td>which stays the same, beyond all time,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that too is just the syllable ‘Om’.</td>
<td>in everything that seems to be.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For everything is this complete reality.</td>
<td>Within each person's mind and heart,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>while objects seem to come and go,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>the self that knows all seeming change</td>
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<td></td>
<td>must carry on. It’s always here,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in everything we seem to know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This self is all reality.</td>
<td><em>This self is all reality.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This same self has four quarters. Reality and self, though one, seem to appear as different things, in different states of consciousness.

3

The outward-knowing waking state, The outside world seems to appear in what we call the ‘waking state’.
with seven limbs and nineteen faces, Here, consciousness seems outward bound: from self, through little body’s gross perceptions, out into a world containing all our bodies and the many other object-things our outward senses seem to know.
experiencing gross [objects];
this is the first aspect, of universality.

4

The dream state, But when attention seems to turn back in, away from outside things, to thoughts and feelings in our minds, another state appears, called ‘dream’.
inward-knowing,
with seven limbs and nineteen faces, Here, consciousness remains within our minds; and all that can appear are subtle forms of changing mind, created by imagining.
experiencing subtlety;
this is the second aspect, of burning energy.

5

Where one who sleeps desires no desire at all, When mind subsides and dreams dissolve, there comes a state we call ‘deep sleep’: where seeming things do not appear.
that is deep sleep.
The deep sleep state, where unity has been attained,
that is deep sleep.
The deep sleep state, where unity has been attained,
whose content is pure consciousness and happiness, experiencing happiness, [the inner light] that’s manifested in the mind; this is the third aspect, of consciousness.

6 This is the Lord of all. This is the knower of all. This is the inner controller. This is the source of all, the origin and dissolution of those that have become.

7 Not knowing inward, nor knowing outward, nor knowing both [inward and outward]; not just containing consciousness, not knowing or unknowing;

In depth of sleep, all bonds are loosed.
All conflicts, all divisions end.
Thus, consciousness is clarified; and its true nature shines as peace, as undivided unity, as unconditioned happiness.

All things are known by consciousness.
It is the underlying ground: from which all seeming things arise; on which they stand, relate together, are controlled; and finally, in which all seeming things dissolve.

Since consciousness continues through all states that we experience; it can’t in truth be called a state: in which some seeming thing is known or is unknown or partly known.

It is the background of all states: the background of reality, against which seeming things are known.

And it is also knowing self: which lights all seeming things, by its own self-illuminating light.
The three states

not seen, Unseen by mind or any sense, it lights all mind and every sense, and all that is experienced.

never the object of any transaction, Its knowledge is no kind of act: that may be started up or stopped, or be directed or attached to changing objects in the world.

the one self-evident principle, as the essential basis where all differences must be resolved.

at peace, It is the source of peace and love, where self and world are known as one.
in unaffected happiness beyond duality;

it is conceived as the fourth.

It is the self.

It’s that which [each of us] needs to know.

That which is this self corresponds to the syllable ‘Om’, considered as a single sound.

Three letters, joined in single sound, make up the word pronounced as ‘Om’. First comes the letter ‘a’, then ‘u’, then ‘m’; together, they form ‘Om’.
Considering the elements,

the aspects [of the self]
correspond
to the elements
[of sound],

and the elements
correspond
to the aspects.

[The elements are] the letter ‘a’,
the letter ‘u’,
the letter ‘ma’.

9

[The aspect] of universality and
the waking state
correspond to
the first element,
the letter ‘a’:
either from ‘åpti’
[‘attaining’], or from
‘ādimattva’ [‘being first’].

One who knows thus essentially attains all desires and becomes the first.

10

[The aspect] of burning fire and
the dream state
correspond to
the second element, the letter ‘u’:

‘A’ represents the waking world that body’s outward senses see.

This is the world of ‘common sense’, from which we start to look for truth that stays the same through changing views, through various different sights and sounds and other such appearances perceived from different points of view.

‘U’ represents the subtle forms we dream within our changing minds, conceiving thoughts and fantasies urged on by feeling and desire.
either from ‘utkarsha’ ['elevation'], or from ‘ubhayatva’ ['being both'].

One who knows thus truly elevates the tradition of knowledge and becomes even-handed.

No one in his family comes to be ignorant of reality.

11

[The aspect] of consciousness and the deep sleep state correspond to the third element, the letter ‘ma’:

either from ‘miti’ ['measuring’ or ‘constructing’],
or from ‘apiti’ ['merging'].
The fourth [aspect] corresponds to no element. It cannot be an object of any action; for in it all appearances of seeming objects come to rest. It is the unconditioned happiness of non-duality. The syllable ‘Om’ is thus only the self. One who knows thus joins back, through self, into one’s own true self.

The whole word ‘Om’ continues on from ‘a’ to ‘u’ and then to ‘m’: thus representing consciousness which carries on through changing states and so contains them all in one. In this unchanging consciousness where all appearances dissolve, no separate ego can remain and happiness is realized; for self and world are known as one. ‘Om’ is thus non-duality: where truth but merges self in self and self shines by itself, alone.
The divine presence

God and self

From the Vedas to the Upanishads, there is a general movement away from the myths and rituals of religious worship, towards philosophical questioning. In two of the main Upanishads, the concept of ‘God’ figures prominently; but it does so in the context of a reasoned enquiry into the nature of reality, knowledge and happiness.

Of these two Upanishads, one is called by the name ‘ish’, which means ‘God’ or the ‘Lord’. In Sanskrit, ‘ish’ is a verbal root that means both to ‘own’ and to ‘rule’. So, when God is called ‘ish’, it implies that all things belong to God and that they are all governed by God.

The Isha Upanishad adds to this sense of divine belonging and governance, by saying that everything in the world is ‘ish-vasyam’. Literally, this means that everything is ‘for the sake of God to live in’. The implication is clear. God is not some alien owner or ruler who dominates from a distance. Instead, God’s presence is immediate, in everything. All things belong to that divine presence, whose home is everywhere. That presence is the single, inner life of the entire universe. Each thing perceived is just an outer habitation of that one inmost life. From that, all governance and guidance comes, in all acts and happenings. All things are for its sake.

Our bodies and our minds are no exception. Each body, each mind, each faculty of body or mind, each physical and mental act belongs to a single, divine presence that is called ‘God’. That one presence lives in each personality. It rules each personality from deep within, beneath all outward names and forms and qualities.

That divine presence is obscured by our various personal claims, that our bodies and minds are personal owners and rulers of the life within them. In most of our personalities, there is an egotistical claim: that the personality belongs to its body or its mind. This claim makes it appear that our bodies or our minds are in charge, that they decide their acts and rule their personal experiences. This is a false pretence. It hides the true source from which our decisions and our experiences arise.

Each person’s body and mind are driven instruments. They cannot be the real source of anyone’s experience. If one looks for such a source, it may be conceived as a ‘divine presence’, beyond each body and each mind. It is that
presence which lives truly, in every one of us. But most of us misunderstand it, by claiming that we personally own the life within us. Its purity of inner guidance gets confused, with the personal and petty will of our externally conditioned egos.

So, in the Ísha Upanishad, a twofold approach is described. On the one hand, the ego’s claims are surrendered; so that all changing things may be more truly enjoyed, as expressions of a divine presence. On the other hand, to enable this surrender, a simple question is asked. Whose are these changing things that appear in the physical and mental world? What is the divine presence to which they belong?

And the answer is given that such a presence may be realized as ātman: the real self that shines unmixed in everyone and everything, beneath all names and forms and qualities of personality and world.

**Translation (from the Ísha Upanishad)**

1

This [entire universe] is all for God to live in it: whatever changes in this changing world. By that renunciation, [all of it] may be enjoyed.

But do not covet [it]. For whose is any property?

4

There is no movement in the one, whose quickness far surpasses thought.

**Retelling (from FTU, pages 162-166)**

This [entire universe] is all for God to live in it: whatever changes in this changing world. By that renunciation, [all of it] may be enjoyed.

But do not covet [it]. For whose is any property?

Thus giving up all things to God, whatever changes in this changing universe may be enjoyed: untainted by possessiveness, uncompromised by wanting it.

Whatever there may be to claim, to whom, in truth, does it belong?

It is unmoving unity; yet mind and sense cannot catch up with it. They always lag behind.
It's that which always
always goes before,
beyond the reach
beyond the reach of sense and mind.

Outrunning alien things
which run on by
[pursued or in pursuit],
it stands at rest
[within itself].

On it, all change
and movement
are produced,
from subtle energy.

5

It moves;
and yet
it does not move.

It's far beyond
the furthest reach
of space and time;
and yet it is
immediate, forever close,
inseparably present here.

It's here inside,
in everything;

It is the unchanged base of change,
still centre of all happiness
which every action seeks to reach.
And yet, it always stays ahead.

Just by its nature, as it is,
unmoved itself by any act,
it is the source of energy
from which all seeming actions rise.

It does not move; yet it alone
is all that every movement is,
and it is all those many things
that we perceive to move and change.

To sense and mind, it's far beyond
the furthest distances of space,
much prior to the early past,
more final than the end of time.
Yet nothing else can be so close.

It's here and now: in every sight,
in every sound and smell and taste,
in every touch, in every thought
and feeling, in each mind and heart.

It is the only thing that's known
immediately; because it is
the living centre of each heart:
the knowing self we each call 'I'.

This knowing self is consciousness:
the background of appearances
that are perceived by sense and mind.
yet it is outside all of this.

It stays through all experience, as seeming objects come and go.

It is beyond all seeming things, beyond the changing universe that mind and senses seem to see. And yet, it can be found within each object in this seeming world.

Each seeming object that we know is known combined with consciousness; and thus combined with consciousness is but a part of consciousness.

In truth, each object that we know is nothing else but consciousness.

Though mind and sense seem to perceive external objects in the world, the self, in truth, knows everything as nothing else but consciousness.

Thus, in each object, what we call ‘reality’ is consciousness: which is the nature of the self.

As mind and sense see seeming things, the self, in truth, knows but itself.

And that is plain reality: which is beyond all seeming things; yet always is, in every thing.

6

For one who sees all beings in pure self alone, and just this self in everyone and everything,

False ego is a seeming self: a self that seems conditioned as a little mind or body, which is part of a much larger world.

Beneath this false identity, of self with body or with mind,
there’s nothing found not to accept.
There’s nothing alien anywhere, from which to hide or shrink away.

For everything is known in self, and self is known in everything.

the real self is utterly impersonal; it is the base of consciousness, upon which all conditions are compared and known.

It is the unconditioned base of all conditions in the world.

Where outward-seeming consciousness is turned back in, towards its source, it is dissolved in truth of self, which is complete reality.

When this plain truth is realized, what is there then to be renounced? How can disharmony arise?

There, in that knowing where all things, all beings are but self alone, what could be found inadequate?

Where knowing is identity of knowing self with what is known, there known and knower are but one; with nothing alien in between that could obscure plain simple truth: thus making knowledge incomplete, creating partiality, distorted views and nagging doubt.

For self, to know is just to be. Its very being is to shine.

Its nature is to light itself, without an intervening act that could divide it from itself or could obscure its clarity.
Then what dissatisfaction or delusion could apply at all: in seeing that pure unity?

What grief, delusion can exist for one who knows true unity, where everything is one with self?

8

That [self] shines pure, through everything:

True self is pure, unbodied light of unconditioned consciousness, pervading all experience.

unconstrained by muscled body,

It has no organs, nor does it take part in any kind of act. No function can pertain to it.

unaffected by all ill, untouched by any taint of sin.

Untouched by any harm or ill, unstained by misery and wrong, it is the living principle which lights perception, knows all thought and shines expressed as what we seek through all our feelings and desires.

It's that which sees, direct within:

intelligent, encompassing,

Self-evident, beyond all things that may appear or disappear, it simply is, in its own right: completely known, beyond all doubt, as self-illuminating light.

depending only on itself.

From it, all purposes have been assigned, throughout unending time.

Upon this changeless, certain base, each seeming thing pursues a course of seeming change through passing time that can't be known with certainty.

The rule of light

It is all very well to say that everything is ‘ruled by God’ or by some ultimate ‘self’, but what exactly does that mean? What precisely is this ‘God’ or ‘self’, and how does it rule?

An answer is very briefly stated in the Isha Upanishad, stanza 8 (the last stanza translated above). Here, ‘God’ or ‘self’ is described as pure light, un-
affected by bodily constraints. From that unbodied light, all objectives are determined. God’s rule is, quite simply, the rule of unaffected light.

In the Shvetåshvatara Upanishad, this conception is described a little further. Here, there are many references to ‘God’: not only as ‘isha’ or the ‘Lord’; but, more often, as ‘deva’. Both Sanskrit words, ‘isha’ and ‘deva’, can be translated as ‘God’; but their roots are quite different. Where ‘isha’ implies ‘power’ and ‘domination’, ‘deva’ implies ‘light’.

In fact, the Sanskrit word ‘deva’ is related to the English ‘divine’. They each imply the pure light of heaven, unmixed with the obscurities and the limitations of earthly things. So, while ‘deva’ can be translated as ‘God’, it can also be translated as the ‘principle of light’.

That principle is also called ‘consciousness’. It is the common principle of illumination in all experience. In our personalities, it is seen mixed with our limited faculties of mind and body, where it is found expressed. In the world outside, it is seen mixed with the limited objects and happenings that our faculties perceive. But in itself, it’s quite unmixed, beyond all limitations.

Found thus unmixed, beneath its mixed appearances, it is the same everywhere: the one complete reality that all experience shows. It is one single consciousness, expressed in everything, throughout the universe.

This conclusion presents us with an immediate difficulty. If the whole universe expresses consciousness, then it is all alive. How can we make sense of that? We recognize that consciousness can be expressed in the feelings, thoughts and actions of living creatures. But how can we find any such expression in objects that are inanimate, like a rock or a mountain?

The difficulty arises because we think of consciousness as somehow tied to our personal faculties of mind and sense. Certainly, we do not find such faculties in a mountain or a rock, not even in some rudimentary form. But is it true that consciousness is tied to any mental or sensual faculties? Not really. If we take a dispassionate view of our personal faculties, they are only expressions of consciousness. They depend on it. Not it on them. It is their underlying ground, beneath their varying activities.

In fact, consciousness and life can be recognized in anything, depending on how we look at it.

On the one hand we can look at something as an object. It is then a piece of world. It’s seen by looking outwards: at some picture of an external world. In such a picture, previous objects of perception are found pieced together; and the new object is interpreted by fitting it in with them. But, by thus fitting things together, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, we don’t treat them as alive. Such external fitting builds our pictures of the world, but that alone does not show any consciousness expressed.
On the other hand, as we interpret our pictures, we have another way of looking at them. We can turn back from our objective picture-building, to look at something reflectively. Then it is seen as somehow akin to us. It shows us underlying principles of order, meaning and value. These are principles we share in common with it, at the depth of our experience. As we understand such principles in what is seen, we reflect back, into the ground of consciousness that underlies our pictures and perceptions of the world.

This is how we understand our own actions, thoughts and feelings, when we take them to express the consciousness we find in each of us. It is also how we understand the actions, thoughts and feelings of other living beings, as we communicate with them. For all such communication is based upon a common ground of consciousness.

And we can understand all nature in this way, reflectively: by falling deeper back into our own experience, to common principles that we find expressed within our personalities and in the world outside as well.

For example, suppose a scientist examines a rock, and then reflects upon its construction and its geological location. In this reflection, principles of order get touched upon, as ordered patterns and structures are seen to have some further meaning and function. Thus, principles of meaning and function get touched upon, and even lead to principles of value.

All these principles are naturally expressed in the rock and its geological terrain. And they are understood at the depth of the scientist's mind, by reflecting back there. They underlie the perceiving mind, and the perceived world as well. They are naturally inherent, in both mind and world.

When we thus reflect on nature, we treat it as alive. We then stop fitting bits of it into our imposed pictures. Instead, we listen to what it has to say. By this attitude of listening, we recognize (at least implicitly) that it expresses consciousness.

In the personalities of living creatures, nature’s expression is personal, through personal faculties of body and mind. In objects like a rock, where no such faculties are found, nature’s expression is impersonal. There nature speaks impersonally, but it speaks all the same. All order, meaning and value are natural expressions of consciousness, whether in personality or outside world. All nature is alive, as it expresses consciousness throughout the world.

In this view of nature, all happenings and faculties are included in it. No happening or faculty remains excluded, to drive nature or to perceive it from outside. In the microcosm of individual experience, nature includes the perceiving body and mind. In the macrocosm of the external world, nature includes all bodies and minds, with all their acts and faculties.

Thus understood, nature includes each act that moves things and each perception that makes things appear. From within itself, nature produces all
of its acts and happenings. In this sense, it moves itself and appears by itself, of its own accord.

But as it moves and manifests itself, it inherently expresses consciousness. That is the source of all the order, meaning and value which we see in nature. That alone keeps nature regulated and coherent. Just that makes nature intelligible. That by itself is nature’s underlying motivation. As nature acts, of its own accord, it does so for the sake of consciousness. It’s thus that consciousness is seen expressed.

Since consciousness is pure light, it doesn’t wish nature to do anything; it doesn’t tell nature what to do; it doesn’t interfere at all in what takes place. As consciousness shines unaffected through experience, it is the knowing ground beneath all acts and happenings. Unmoved itself by any act, it is the final ground of our experience. From it, all actions rise. On it, all actions take place. Back into it, all actions must return and be absorbed. So, naturally, all acts and happenings arise expressing it.

That is nature’s basic inspiration. All nature is inspired, from within, by the very presence of consciousness, throughout experience. In a fundamental sense, it’s only for the sake of consciousness that anything is done.

In short, consciousness is the unmoved mover, the originating cause of nature’s manifestation. That is the position of the Shvetåshvatara Upanishad, chapter 6, as translated and retold below.

Here, ‘deva’ is translated as ‘God’ or ‘divinity’ or the ‘divine’ or the ‘principle of light’. ‘Isha’ is translated as the ‘Lord’ or ‘ruler’ or ‘governor’.

Towards the end, stanza 6.20 is interpreted to show a curious ambivalence about the concept of ‘God’. The stanza speaks of an ‘end to grief … for those who don’t discern “God”’. It says that this is possible, when people ‘roll up space as if it were an empty skin’. This can be interpreted to mean that space and time are not absolute. Their extension through the world is only a relative conception that stretches an observing mind from narrow objects to the entire universe.

When our minds are stretched out in this way, the concept of ‘God’ arises: as a universal consciousness that encompasses the universe. But when our minds reflect back deeply, beneath their superficial pictures; then all of space and time is seen enfolded there, in the microcosm of one’s own individuality. The whole extent of space and time thus gets rolled up, and consciousness is seen unlimited in individual experience. There is no need then to universalize consciousness, through the concept of ‘God’.

In the last stanza (6.23), devotion to a teacher is described as a way of love for the divine. Again, this can be interpreted as showing an individual approach, to the same truth that is more universally approached as ‘God’.
Translation (from the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad)

6.1

Some poets, in delusion, speak of ‘self-becoming nature’; others, thus, of ‘time’.

But in the world, it’s by God’s boundlessness that the wheel of all reality is turned.

6.2

It’s that by which all this [entire universe] forever is contained.

It is that knowing which originates all time, holds all conditioned qualities, knows everything.

Ruled by it all acts unfold.

It may be thought about as earth, water, fire, air, and ether.

Retelling (from FTU, pages 262-269)

Some speak of self-becoming nature, or of passing time, as causing all that happens in the world.

But seen more truly, all the happenings of time and nature act expressing unconditioned truth in the conditioned things of world.

This truth is all reality, containing the entire world.

And further, it’s pure consciousness: the changeless source of changing time, the unconditioned, knowing ground of all conditioned qualities.

As moments pass, it carries on: enabling different qualities to be compared in course of time, and lighting all that’s ever known.

Inspired by the unseen guidance of this unconditioned light, all world’s conditioned acts unfold.

It gets to be conceived as the solidity of earth, as water’s changing flow, as fire’s radiance, air’s conditioning, and as the continuity of space and time, pervading everywhere.
6.3

Doing work and ceasing it time and again, one comes to join through principle the unity of principle:

through the one [principle of consciousness],

through the two [principles of nature and consciousness],

through the three [principles of quality – inertia, energy and harmony],

through the eight [principles of the five elements, mind, understanding and ego],

and indeed through time, and through the subtle attributes of self.

6.4

That which originates conditioned acts and orders all occurrences, that is their unbecoming – where what activity has done becomes destroyed.

In everyone’s experience, the world is known through various acts of mind and body: rising up from underlying consciousness to take attention out to world, and then returning back again to take in what is thus perceived.

Time and again, each person acts; to learn a little of the world.

And every act ends in its source of underlying consciousness, as what was learned becomes absorbed.

Here, where all things are understood, one comes through various partial truths to unity of final truth, beneath all difference and change.

It’s from this common, changeless ground that all conditioned acts arise.

It is from here that different occurrences co-ordinate.

But here itself, there are no acts and no occurrences at all.

Here, all that has been done by doing is entirely destroyed.
As actions pass, that carries on: essentially apart.

6.5

It is the first, the unifying cause of instrumental causes. It is the first, the unifying, unmoved cause, of causes that are moved to act towards results.

It is beyond triple time [past, present, future], seen undivided into parts, Thus it is seen beyond all time, found undivided into parts;

shown by all forms, the happening of what’s become, the truth that has of old been heeded as a worshipped God: who’s manifested in all forms, who is

invoked as God, standing in one’s own mind and heart, the happening of all that has become, and who stands here within, in everyone’s own mind and heart.

heeded thus of old.

6.6

[Seen] through the tree of happenings in time, it is beyond, it’s alien. Seen through the tree of branching happenings that form in time, the truth is known as something else, beyond.

From it, this universe is cycled to and fro. From it, the whole created world goes out and then returns, and is thus cycled and recycled round: as different appearances succeed each other in our minds.

The ‘Lord’ we worship cleanses sin, and brings well-founded order [that holds things where they belong]. The ‘Lord’ who’s worshipped with devotion cleanses sin, removes all ill, brings order, justice, harmony.

The divine presence
Standing as self, He's known as that which does not die, the home of everything.
Thus known, He's that in which all things come home. He is that principle abiding here in everyone: the self which does not change or die.

6.7
That is the ultimate great Lord of lords, the final God of gods, the ultimate controller of controllers.
That must be known beyond: invoked and praised as God, as Lord of the becoming world.

6.8
Of it, there's found no faculty that causes an effect.
Nothing equal to it, nor more than it, is seen.
Its transcending capability is heard in many ways.
It is inherent nature: [immanent in] knowledge, strength and action.

That is the ultimate, great ‘Lord of Lords’, the ultimate divinity of all divinities, the ultimate controlling principle of all controlling powers.
It's that which must be known beyond: as ‘Lord’ of the becoming world, the principle that is invoked and worshipped through the name of ‘God’.

It has itself no faculty of doing anything; nor has it anything that it must do.
Nor is there anything that is its equal or superior.
Nor is there even anything that is additional to it.
As the transcendent source of all of nature’s energy, it is revealed in many different ways.
For it is also immanent: as the inherent principle of nature shared in common by all faculties that know the world, all capabilities of strength and all the world’s activities.
6.9

Nothing, in all the world, is its controller, nor its ruler, nor its exclusive sign. It has no ruler or controller anywhere, in all the world. Not has it an exclusive sign whose absence shows it is not there; for it is present everywhere.

It's the originating cause, the overseer of our overseeing faculties. It is the underlying cause, the common guiding principle, of all our guiding faculties.

Of it, there is no parent source; there is no overseer. It has no further source of birth, nor any guiding principle, found anywhere beyond itself.

6.10

Like a spider, with threads born from its primal substance, the one divinity surrounds itself with its own self-becoming. Just like a spider weaves a web born forth of its own inner substance, one sole principle of light seems to surround itself with an apparent universe that's made of its own being, self-become.

It's that [divinity] which grants us dissolution in uncompromised reality. To it, each one of us may turn, from compromise with outward show, to find all separateness dissolved in unobscured reality.

6.11

The one divinity, pervading everything, is hidden in all beings: as the inner self in everyone. This single principle of light, pervading all the universe, is hidden in all beings: as the inner self in everyone.

It's that which oversees each act, that which lives in everything. It oversees all seeming acts: as that which lives in everything, observing all experiences, itself completely unattached to any kind of changing act.
It is the witness, looking on quite unaffected, absolute.

Through all perceived appearances of changing world, it is the witness: unconditioned, absolute.

6.12

It is the one impelling will, of the many who don’t act of themselves.

It’s that one principle of activating will, among the many that aren’t active in themselves.

It is that which makes the one seed manifold.

And it’s the underlying base on which one seed of all creation is made manifold, thus giving rise to the variety of things that happen in the world.

The steadfast see it, standing as self.

Whoever sees it standing here through all experiences, as one’s own self, finds lasting happiness:

To them, as not to others, lasting happiness [is found].

which can’t be found in alien things that are not realized as self.

6.13

It is the constancy of constant things, the consciousness of conscious things, the one among the many, that which fulfils desires.

It’s the unchanging constancy of constant things, the knowing core of consciousness in conscious things, the one reality among the many seeming things of world, the central principle of value from which all desires arise.

It’s the originating cause, approached through sāṅkhya [analysis] and yoga [discipline].

And it’s the underlying cause of all phenomena: approached through analytic reasoning, or through techniques and disciplines that harness energy and power.
Knowing [that] divinity,
one finds release,
through all
bonds and ties.

6.14

There the sun
The sun does not shine here, nor do
does not shine,
the moon and stars, nor lightning from
nor moon and stars;
the sky, nor any alien fire.
nor do these
lightning flashes shine;
much less this fire.

It alone shining,
It shines alone, by its own light.
Its very being is to shine.

everything
All shines reflecting after it.
shines after it.
Whatever in the world appears
reflects its light of consciousness.

By its light,
Thus all the world is nothing else
everything here
but the reflected light of self.
shines back.
As self illuminates the world,

6.15

One swan [free spirit]
It is the one free spirit in
in the midst of this
the midst of a conditioned world.
becoming world,

it alone is the fire
And it alone is all the fire
permeated deep within
of energy that permeates
the waters’ surging flow.
the changes and the transformations
of the world’s conditioning.

Knowing just that,
Just knowing it takes one beyond
one goes beyond death.
all seeming bonds, to deathlessness.

There is no other
There is no other way than this.
way to go.
6.16

It does everything, knows everything. It's the originating cause of everything that's known and done;

It is itself its own knowing source. the self-caused, knowing ground of learning and of all conditioned qualities;

Its are all qualities, all learning. where all-destroying time originates and is destroyed.

It is the time of time [which shines where passing time has passed itself away].

It is the knower of the primal field, the guiding principle that rules all qualities. It's that which knows the primal field of everyone's experience.

It is the cause of states, of bondage and liberation, in the world of birth and death. From that one guiding principle comes order, meaning, quality. All things are ruled by it, within.

6.17

It is just that which does not die, which knows through everything; As deathless consciousness, pervading everywhere, it is the changeless witness of all happening.

which stands complete, as Lord and guardian of this evolving universe. It stands complete, as Lord and guardian of this changing universe.

It's always here, as that which governs all this moving world. From it, all order and all regularity originate.

For this governance, no other cause is found. There is no other cause of ordered regularity, enabling us to understand the world.
6.18

It is what comes before, from which Brahma [the creator] is set forth. 

From it, the Vedas are brought forth, for him. 

In search of liberation, I take refuge in just that which is divine: the light of self, within the mind.

6.19

Partless, it is detached from acts, at peace. 

Blameless, unstained, it is the final bridge of deathlessness, like a fire that completely burns its fuel.

It's always peaceful: undivided into parts, and unaffected by all action in the world.

It's free of blame, cannot be stained, the final bridge of deathlessness: just like a fire burning clean to leave no smoke or ash behind.

6.20

When humankind shall roll up space as if it were a skin, an end to grief shall come about, for those who don’t discern ‘God’.

When humankind shall turn all space back on itself, and shall thus roll it up, just like an empty skin; then there shall be an end to grief for the agnostic about ‘God’.

6.21

By power of discipline, and by divine grace,
Shvetāśvatara spoke of pure reality, complete and ultimate.

[He spoke] from surety of knowledge, to those advanced along the way, delighting the assembled company of seers.

6.22

The highest secret in Vedānta, as declared in a past age, must not be given out to one who does not come to peace, who’s not a son or a disciple.

6.23

To one whose love for the divine transcends all else, as [is that love] for the divine, so too [is love] towards the teacher. To such a one, all meanings told shine forth from unconditioned self, shine forth from unconditioned self.

The highest secret of philosophy, declared and handed down from times long past, is not passed on except to a disciple who thus finds true clarity and peace.

Where love for truth transcends all else, so too does love towards a teacher: who is living truth itself, for one to whom the truth is shown.

All meanings that are told and heard shine forth from unconditioned light that is each person’s real self.
Teacher and disciple

The relationship of teacher and disciple is central to the Upanishads. In particular, philosophical questions are often discussed by telling a story, in which someone approaches a teacher and receives instruction.

But this teacher-disciple relationship is a delicate matter of emotional sensibility: which could hardly be expected to lend itself to any crude tailoring according to some intellectually prescribed order. On this subject, the Upanishads hold back from their usual style of forthright, definitive assertion. Instead, the teacher-disciple relationship is suggested by example; and its necessity is briefly indicated in a few, rather sparing passages where it is directly described.

Some of these passages are shown translated and retold below.

Seeking truth

Translation (from the Muṇḍaka Upanishad) Retelling (from FTU, page 190)

1.2.12

‘Examining constructed worlds built up by action, one who seeks reality may well arrive at disillusionment.

‘For there is nothing [here, in these worlds] that isn’t fabricated by some kind of act.

‘With sacrificial fuel in one’s hand,

‘for the sake of knowing that [reality beyond all acts],

‘Whoever seeks this common source must find a teacher who will show unchanging truth in seeming change, the deathless centre of all life that each of us experiences.…’
‘one should approach only a teacher who has heard and is established in the truth.

1.2.13
‘For one who has attained restraint, whose mind has turned towards tranquility, ‘the knowing [teacher], suitably approached, has taught that knowledge of reality ‘by which one knows the changeless principle of truth: impersonal within all personality…’

Not found by speech

Translation (from the Kaṭha Upanishad) Retelling (from FTU, page 40)

6.12
It cannot be attained by speech, nor by mind or sight. Mere talking cannot find out truth, nor can ideas conceived by mind, nor mere sensations of the world impressed on mind by any sense.

If not through one who says ‘It is’, how else can it be understood? If not by finding out from one who knows it well, beyond all doubt, and shows exactly what it is, how else can truth be understood?
Learning from a teacher

Translation (from the Kaṭha Upanishad)  

2.7

‘It’s that which many do not even get to hear of; ‘and, of even those who hear, which many do not understand.

‘It’s only someone very rare and special who attains it and can speak of it effectively.

‘It’s known only by someone very rare and special who’s been taught of it effectively.

Retelling (from FTU, page 12)

2.7

‘You’ve chosen well to seek this truth. Not many hear it; and, of those, not many rightly understand.

‘For precious few are blessed to find a teacher who can show this truth.

‘And even when thus plainly shown, only a few want truth enough to overcome the fears that rise as ego’s self-deceptions die.

2.8-9

‘Truth is approached in different ways; and therefore it cannot be taught by one who does not know it well, beyond the ways that lead to it.

‘Truth is approached in different ways; and therefore it cannot be taught by one who does not know it well, beyond the ways that lead to it.

‘Professed by anyone who hasn’t fully risen up to it.
‘There is no way of getting there, unless it’s taught by someone else.1
‘And when it’s taught as nothing else but one’s own self, then there’s no going there at all [because it’s here and now what one already is].
‘For it is subtler than all measured subtlety, beyond all argument.

‘This conviction cannot be attained by argument;
‘but, dear friend, it can be truly known, taught by someone else.

‘This is what you’ve attained, holding so firmly on to truth.

‘For [each of] us, would that the questioner were like you, Naciketas....’

‘It’s subtler than the subtest thing that any faculty perceives; and therefore it cannot be reached without the help of someone else who’s gone beyond all faculties of body or of sense or mind.

‘It’s known beyond all argument when it is shown by someone else, as nothing else but self alone: which different people share alike beneath all changing faculties of body and of sense and mind....’

1The preceding sentence is one way of interpreting the words: ‘ananya-prokte gatir atra nästi’. The following sentence (spread over two stanzas) gives another interpretation of these same original words.
Coming home

**Translation** (from the Chândogya Upanishad)  

6.14.1  
‘Dear son, it is as though a person from [the land of] the Gandhāras was brought blindfolded to some inhospitable place, and was abandoned there.

‘That person then might wander aimlessly towards the east, or towards the south, or towards the north, or towards the west; brought thus blindfolded here, left thus blindfolded here.

6.14.2  
‘And it’s as though someone might release his blindfold and say: “In that direction are the Gandhāras. That is the direction you must travel.”

‘Thus instructed and empowered with intelligence,

**Retelling**  

(from FTU, pages 115-116)

‘How can this truth be understood?’

‘Suppose a man, blindfolded, finds himself quite lost in a strange place and wanders, crying out for help.

‘Suppose that someone takes away the blindfold from his eyes, and shows him how to seek and find his way.

‘Then he can journey on, from place to place, and get back home again.
'he can ask (his way)
from village to village,

‘and arrive precisely
at [the land of]
the Gandhāras.

‘So also, one
who has a teacher

‘knows that he’s delayed
only so long
as he is not released
[from ignorance];

‘and thence he knows
that he’s arrived:
entirely complete....’

‘So too, a teacher shows you how
to seek and find your way back home
to your own self: where consciousness
is unconditioned, simple truth
at one with all reality.’
Scheme of transliteration

To make things easier for the general reader, this book uses a simplified system of Sanskrit transliteration. In particular, only two kinds of diacritical marking have been used.

- The first is a bar overhead (as in ‘ā’), which indicates a long vowel.
- The second is a dot underneath (as in ‘ṛ’). This indicates a kind of hard consonant, called a ‘retroflex’, as explained further below.

The Sanskrit alphabet is famous for being highly phonetic. In effect, this means that words are written pretty well exactly as they are pronounced. To pronounce Sanskrit correctly, it is largely a matter of knowing the rules, which are very clear and very systematic.

*It is not difficult to get the pronunciation approximately correct; and for anyone who is going to use Sanskrit words and names, it is worth trying, because the ‘shape’ of the sounds is rather important.* During the many thousands of years over which the Sanskrit language has evolved, a great deal of attention and care has gone into developing sounds that evoke appropriate qualities of feeling and attitude. It is a pity to throw this away for not paying a few minutes of attention to what the sounds should be.

Here are a few suggestions.

1. Vowels: The general rule here is that a bar over a letter indicates a long vowel. Without a bar, vowels are short, except for ‘e’ and ‘o’, which are always pronounced long. This ‘e’ is not pronounced like ‘e’ in ‘bet’. Instead, it is pronounced like ‘-ay’ in ‘day’. And ‘o’ is not pronounced like ‘o’ in ‘hot’. Instead, it is pronounced like ‘o’ in ‘bold’. The list of vowels is as follows:

   - ‘a’ . . . . . . . . . . as ‘-er’ . . . . . . . in ‘father’
   - ‘ā’ . . . . . . . . . . as ‘a’ . . . . . . . . in ‘father’
   - ‘i’ . . . . . . . . . . as ‘i’ . . . . . . . . in ‘fit’
   - ‘ī’ . . . . . . . . . . as ‘ee’ . . . . . . in ‘feet’
   - ‘u’ . . . . . . . . . . as ‘u’ . . . . . . . . in ‘put’
   - ‘ū’ . . . . . . . . . . as ‘oo’ . . . . . . . . in ‘mood’
   - ‘e’ . . . . . . . . . . as ‘-ay’ . . . . . . . . in ‘day’
   - ‘ai’ . . . . . . . . . . as ‘i’ . . . . . . . . in ‘ride’
   - ‘o’ . . . . . . . . . . as ‘o’ . . . . . . . . in ‘bold’
   - ‘au’ . . . . . . . . . . as ‘-ow’ . . . . . . . . in ‘how’
2. **Consonants**: These are generally pronounced as in English, except with the following peculiarities and modifications:

2.1 **Unmarked consonants are always soft**:
- ‘c’ is pronounced as ‘ch’ in ‘child’ (not as ‘c’ in ‘case’).
- ‘t’ is pronounced something like ‘th’ in ‘thought’, but more accurately like ‘t’ in the Italian pronunciation of ‘pasta’.
- ‘d’ is pronounced rather like ‘th’ in ‘this’, but more accurately like ‘d’ in the Italian ‘dolce’ or in the Spanish ‘Cordoba’.

2.2 **Retroflex consonants are marked with a dot underneath**: This applies to ‘t’, ‘d’ and ‘n’. These are pronounced with the tip of the tongue doubled back and touching the roof of the palate. There is no exact equivalent in English or other European languages. The best approximation for most English speakers is to pronounce:

- ‘t’ ................................ as ‘t’............. in ‘table’
- ‘d’ ................................ as ‘d’............. in ‘desk’
- ‘n’ ................................ as ‘n’............. in ‘noise’

2.3 **Aspirates**: An aspirate occurs whenever h follows a consonant, except for ‘sh’ (which is pronounced as the ordinary English ‘sh’ in ‘should’). Aspirated consonants are not familiar to English speakers; but they are not difficult to pronounce. An aspirated consonant consists simply of a consonant followed by the sound ‘h’: as when a word ending with a consonant is followed immediately by another word starting with ‘h’. For example:

- ‘kh’ ................. as ‘-k h-’........ in ‘pack horse’
- ‘gh’ ................. as ‘-g h-’........ in ‘dog house’
- ‘ch’ ................. as ‘-ch-h-’........ in ‘beach-head’
- ‘th’ ................. as ‘-th-’........ in ‘foothold’
- ‘th’ ................. as ‘-thh-’........ in ‘withhold’
- ‘bh’ ................. as ‘-bh-’........ in ‘abhor’

2.4 **Double consonants**: Again, these are not quite familiar to English speakers, but are not difficult to pronounce. As the name suggests, a double consonant consists simply of a consonant followed by itself: as when a word ending with a consonant is followed immediately by another word starting with the same consonant. For example:
‘ll’ . . . . . . . . . . . . . . as ‘-ll’ . . . . . . . . in ‘coal lamp’

‘nn’ . . . . . . . . . . . . . . as ‘-nkn’ . . . . . . in ‘unknown’

Thus, the sound of the Sanskrit word ‘annam’ (meaning ‘food’) could be described as rather like the English ‘un-numb’ (if the reader will forgive the somewhat artificial concoction).

2.5 **Compound consonants**: These can occasionally be tricky. In particular, there can be a problem with the ‘jny’ in ‘jnyānam’, ‘prajnyānam’, ‘vijnyānam’, ‘Yājnyavalkya’, and so on. The ‘j’ needs to be pronounced rather delicately and with very little accentuation. When ‘jny’ begins a word, it is a reasonable approximation to ignore the ‘j’ altogether. Thus ‘jnyānam’ can be quite fairly approximated as ‘nyānam’. When ‘jny’ occurs in the middle of a word, the ‘j’ can be approximated by a very softly pronounced ‘t’ (something like the ‘th’ in ‘thought’). Hence, ‘prajnyānam’ might be approximated by ‘pratnyānam’, and ‘Yājnyavalkya’ might be approximated by ‘Yātnyavalkya’, remembering that the ‘t’ must be very soft and only very delicately pronounced.
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for the original text and for a prose translation of the ‘Nāsadiya’ hymn of creation, Rig Veda 10.129. However, Macdonell also made another translation, in blank verse. It is the second translation that has been reproduced in this book, from A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, edited by Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli and Moore, Charles A., Princeton University Press, Princeton, U.S.A., 1973.


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