

The Upanishads

The *Upanishads* is a collection of texts that were composed mainly between the 7th and 5th centuries BC. They form the last part of the *Vedas* (see pp.16-17), the sacred texts of the Aryans, and are called the *Vedānta* ("Conclusion of the *Veda*"). They are, nevertheless, very different in content and tone from the earlier *Vedas*. In the *Upanishads*, philosophical and mystical questionings replace earlier Vedic concerns with ritual sacrifice. The *Upanishads'* 108 texts are central to later Hinduism, and have attracted many commentaries.

By 500BC both religion and society in India were changing rapidly. The swift growth of cities, with the subsequent emergence of a strong merchant class, meant that the old *varnas* (orders: priest, warrior, trader and serf) no longer corresponded so neatly with reality. Breakaway sects of ascetics, mystics and renunciants repudiated the authority of the *brahmin* priests and their long-established monopoly of religion. Instead, they followed teachers such as Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha (see pp.30-35), and Vardhamana, who became Mahavira (see pp.40-43). This led to a transformation of Indian religious life.

More than any other Hindu text, the *Upanishads* embody this transformation. Rather than invoking external gods, the *Upanishads* look for a god within, so that the emphasis shifts from ritualized acts of sacrifice to the search for the sacred force (*brahman*) that lives in all things. Just as the Aryan sages believed that the sacrifice embodied and mirrored the divine, so the emerging new philosophy saw *brahman's* reflection in the *atman*, or soul. Union

धीमहे वृषंसुवीरममृ ॥६॥ इन्द्राग्निर्देवो दिवः क्रजत्पतिः प्रथिव्यात्रयाः त्रापानरेतांसि जिवन्ति ॥७॥ इममृषुवमस्माकं भस्निगा यत्रोन्म्यांसाः त्रयेदेबेसुषुषुवोवोः ॥८॥ ते त्राणोपवनो गिराज निष्ठाद्रेत्रेऽन्नं गिरः स पावक ऋधी हवो ॥९॥ परिवाजयतिः कविरग्निर्हव्यात्प क्रत्रीतादखड्नानिवाः सुषेसा ॥१०॥ ब्रह्मजा तवेदसंदेवर्वाहति केतवाः ह्यो विश्वायसूर्यो ॥११॥ कविमग्निव्युद्बुद्धिमस्य धर्मो गामधुरे देव ममीधवातनं ॥१२॥ शं भो देव नृणां स्वरो चोती स्ववंपुनः ॥१३॥ कस्य दनपरिणसिधियो सिधियो सिधिविसिप्तयो गोषा ना ग्यते गिरः ॥१४॥ ह्यो ॥१५॥ इन्द्रोऽशनी ॥१६॥ यज्ञस्य ऋषो अग्रयोगि गिरावदत्तसो यव्युत्तममृतं जानवेदसं वियेमिन्नशं सिषमारा ॥१७॥ पाहि नो अग्रकया पाह्युतुति द्वितीयया ॥१८॥ गीर्क्षिस्त्रिस्तुर्विषो ॥१९॥ बृहन्निरयेऽर्द्धे निःशुक्त्रे एते देवो धिः षाः अग्रजेसमिभिनोय विष्णोरेव पावकं श्री दिक्षिः शो चै अये स्वाज्ञर्द्धिः अयः सं पुस्वरयः ॥२०॥ यतो रोयेमसुवो नो जना नाम सृष्टयत्र गी नाम ॥२१॥ त्रामे जरित द्वित्रपतित्तया नेदो रक्षसः ॥२२॥ त्रौ दिवा वरु द्यमिमसां अ सिद्विष्यायुर्दुःरो एतुः ॥२३॥ आग्रवि वसु ड्यसः श्वित्रां राक्षेऽत्र मस्यो आयाः यो देवां उषर्द्धुः ॥२४॥ इदं न श्वित्राः कस्यासो राधाः सिनोदयाः अस्यायस्त्वमसो स्थीरसि विदागार्ध उच्यते नः ॥२५॥ वृषिः अथ अग्रययेत्त्रा तर्जतेः कविः वां विद्यासः समिक्षानधी दिव आ विवासेति वधसः ॥२६॥ आ नो अग्ने धयो वृद्धं रयिं पावकत्वां स्यात् ॥२७॥ त्रिभिः सखा वनजयमाते पुस्तसहं सुतीति सुयज्ञस्तस्मा एयो विश्वाद्यते वसुहेतयं धेजनामः मधोर्नयात्रा यथेमान्यसे चस्तो मायं च यथो ॥२८॥ दशती ॥२९॥ अना वे अग्निं नमसो जे न पात माहु वे धियं चेति च मरति ॥३०॥ स्वर्द्धे

This handwritten page of Sanskrit text is from manuscript of the Chandogya Upanishad. Originally composed between the 8th and 7th centuries BC, the Chandogya is one of the oldest Upanishads and is best known for its equation of the *atman* (soul) within, with the *brahman* (absolute spirit) without.

BALAKI AND KING JABALI

The teachings contained in the *Upanishads* were no longer the exclusive property of the *brahmin* priests, as the *Vedas* had been, but could be followed by the *ksatriyas* (see p.25), the class of kings and warriors from which the Buddha came, and whose prestige now often eclipsed the *brahmins'*.

The earliest, and thus the least mystical or philosophical *Upanishad*, tells the story of Balaki, a proud and learned *brahmin* who approached the king of Benares to instruct him in the *Vedas*. The king offered

the *brahmin* 1,000 cows if he could reveal to him the nature of *brahman* (absolute spirit). The priest first displayed the sun, then the moon, the elements, lightning, thunder and *sona* — all symbols of the Vedic gods — but the king was not satisfied. Instead, he himself expounded the theory of *atman* (soul), yoga and the cycle of rebirth to the humbled *brahmin*.

A variant on the same mythic tale concerns a *brahmin* who sent his son to the palace of King Jabali. The king asked the boy if his father had instructed him in religion. The *brahmin's* son replied that he had, and was

questioned by the king about what happens to creatures when they die and how their souls return. The boy was unable to answer the king's questions and returned to his father in shame. The *brahmin* himself came before the king and asked for the knowledge that he lacked. The king's answer exposed the meaning of caste, *karma* (see pp.24-5), yoga and rebirth, which are the basis of much of later Hindu theory. Another *Upanishad*, dated c.600BC, carried this radical notion further by subordinating the Vedic deities to the mother goddess, who alone is able to recognize *brahman*.