



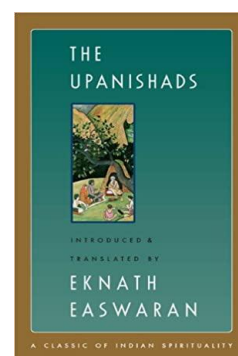
The Prashna Upanishad

Introduction to the Upanishads

This is the edition I have and it has wonderful introductions on each chapter also. It is not necessary to get the same version (unless you want to). You can find it on Amazon and most major book stores:

The Upanishads (Easwaran's Classics of Indian Spirituality, 2) – by Eknath Easwaran [link](#).

There is also an abridged audio version available on Audible and Apple Books.



In the Bhagavad Gita, we find a more practical description of the natural state of human beings when they have realised the Truth. The Gita also describes the main pathways of meditation, devotion and wisdom as the fastest ways to Truth. By contrast, in the Upanishads we see a collection of writings that have much less instruction of how to actually realise what you are but are rich in descriptions of that essence of Truth and what it is like to live it. The Upanishads are some of the oldest scriptures known to us and they are so old we do not even really know who wrote them. We can place them in a different category to the Gita if we see their function is to inspire us, light a fire or even to make us jealous of the Rishis (ancient seers) who wrote them. If the Gita is here to help us understand the power of devotion to the Truth, then the Upanishads are here to make the flame of our devotion a raging fire.

We could think of the Gita as the “How to reach it and why it's worth making the journey” and the Upanishads as the “Here's what you are missing out on - Love letters from the Self” If we look at the meaning and etymology of “Upanishad” we will see it is describing a transmission from Truth directly into the illusion of our thoughts and penetrating it deeply. Infusing our minds and hearts with the power of Truth, the Upanishads are legendary in their power to pierce the veil of illusion. If we read them softly, gently and with reverence we will feel more focused, devoted and inspired that we too can live in freedom. The Upanishads are not to be read to try to understand or to achieve deeper knowledge (although that may happen) and are best taken in as if you are listening to some beautiful music that moves you. Simply letting them into your heart, they will work their magic on you.

Some of the Upanishads come in a story form and some are the records of a dialogue between teacher and student. Often the teacher can come in a very surprising form and so we can see immediately that the Upanishads are already pointing to a pivotal understanding that Truth can come from anywhere at any time and need not necessarily come in a formal way. Each Upanishad is complete on its own and does not rely on any other teaching or even any other Upanishad. We are going to study eleven main Upanishads and allow them to infuse us with their wisdom, power and love. You will notice there are some that you resonate more with and some you may feel an indifference to at first. I would urge you to pay special attention to the ones you do not feel a resonance with at first as these will be the ones that have potential to provide the greatest

breakthroughs. The spiritual power of these great writings is such that our mind senses it and may immediately offer resistance to the words. Your mind may say "I don't like the names and the language used" or it may think that this information is too old to be relevant today but let's not let this type of resistance stop us from reaping the rewards of diving deeper into this powerful body of scriptures.

The Upanishads are teachings based on the description of the One Being/Self of all/Noumenon and so whilst the Gods may be mentioned (such as Brahma, Agni and more) they are mentioned as individual aspects of this One Consciousness and are not to be taken to be separate entities. If we can see the Infinite Self can show itself in an infinite number of ways, we can come to think of these Gods (and even demons) as aspects of our own Divinity.

It is important to note also that whilst the Upanishads have often been associated with ritual and religion, they are describing the Reality that is beyond any such religion (and all religions). They are also beyond philosophy and mind and stand alone in their wisdom. The wisdom in these writings is powerful enough to cause a shift in our spiritual understanding of Reality (as is any authentic non-duality teaching) and as such can be as powerful as any teaching, teacher, retreat, prayer or otherwise. They are a true Darshan or blessing. We must read the words of each Upanishad and then meditate upon them until we bring them into our actual experience. It is with this in mind that I am offering these commentaries on this revered body of scripture, so that you may fall in love with the Upanishads as much as I have and maybe even more. I initially had resistance to these great teachings just like we may all do and I thought they would hold no relevance to me as a seeker of Truth and I am overjoyed to admit how utterly wrong I was. I would not be writing these words without the insight, inspiration and power of the Upanishads and they infused my being with love for the great Sages and Seers of ancient India that I will never know but will eternally offer my gratitude to.

Notes for reading these commentaries.

The numbers in brackets/parentheses refer to the verse numbers in the translation in the book itself. I have added comments on sections of each Upanishad that directly affected and inspired me when I have studied these and absorbed them, however this does not mean that if I have not commented on a particular verse that it contains no wisdom or something that may inspire you. For this reason, I would urge you to read each verse slowly and feel inside your body which ones feel most relevant. For some of the Upanishads that may be all or a lot of the text. For others it may be less. After some time has passed you may find you resonate with other sections that you did not before and so with such great works of scripture it is worth revisiting over time.

It has been the most beautiful opportunity for me to do the same in writing these commentaries and I am grateful.

Introduction

The Prashna Upanishad continues the theme of teacher and student but is unusual in that there are 6 students and each student asks one question. The six students are Sukesha, Satyakama, Gargya, Kausalya, Bhargava and Kabandhi. They each ask one question of the sage Pippalada and his answer forms that section. This Upanishad goes into some areas that we have not looked at in much detail before, we meet the terms “prana” which is life force, energy or kundalini and “rayi” which is form, matter or the elements. Prana is the sentience itself that we see moving and animating all forms. We learn about Prana, Apana, Samana, Vyana and Udana which are all types of life force that perform different functions in the manifestation

The Prashna also deals with the subject of creation and destruction in more detail and we see the image used of a man and his shadow to illustrate how the Self “casts the shadow” of prana and creates form. Just as the shadow cannot be present without the man, so too the manifestation relies upon the Self for its existence.

Let's begin with the invocation as usual.
May we hear only what is good for all.
May we see only what is good for all.
May we serve you, Lord of Love, all our life.
May we be used to spread your peace on earth.
OM shanti shanti shanti”

These words are spoken as an invocation, a calling forth of what already is, into manifestation as our life and our awakening. It is spoken by the Self, to the Self and that is going to bring it into fruition. There is no doubt about this for us. We are the Self.

Question 1

Six students approached the great sage Pippalada and asked him for instruction on their spiritual path. The sage answered that if they would live with him for one year and practice as he asked, he would answer any questions they may have at the end of that year. Pippalada knew that if he allowed them to ask their questions now, they may not be able to receive and act upon the answers. He also knew that the questions would be more direct and penetrate the core of illusion after they had practised for a year. The sage also asked them to trust him so that they would be able to receive the full benefit of the practice they were doing for the year. Doubt can affect the amount of benefit we receive from the practice and from living with a teacher, the trust the students placed in him allows them to progress even faster.

After the year was finished, the first student, Kabandhi, asked who created the universe. The sage's answer brings forth the concepts of “rayi” and “prana.” For convenience, we can think of “rayi” as form or manifestations and “prana” to represent the life force energy. Pippalada uses the analogy of the sun and the moon to represent prana and rayi. Out of the Self came prana, the life force and power behind all creation. Prana then gave birth to subtle and gross matter and the whole world of names and forms. The manifestation is only limited by what form it takes, in some forms it is almost totally unaware of its existence and in others forms prana can contemplate its source and destiny. (1-7)

“The wise see the Lord of Love in the sun, rising in all its golden radiance to give its warmth and light and life to all.” The sun is like the Self, shining light, love and power for existence onto all of creation. Just as we see the sun warm the earth, we see the Lord of Love spreading his light for all of us, as us. In verse 9 we also see reference to the northern and southern path (as we see in the Bhagavad Gita too). Two worlds or destinations after leaving our body are described here in more detail. Those who worship forms, such as individual deities or are in search of sensory pleasure only follow the southern path and go to the astral world of their ancestors, called the “lunar world”. “Southern” path perhaps refers to a lower vibrational frequency. These souls spend time in this world before taking another human form and experiencing the next physical life. They will come

into this physical world again as an infant, oblivious to the life they just left in the lunar world and all previous human incarnations. This cycle goes on and on endlessly as the departed soul gets pulled to the lunar world based on its actions in this lifetime, then gets pulled back to the physical plane to try one more go at fulfilling deep desires to be safe, loved and free.

Those who search for the truth and are practised in meditation, wisdom and faith in the Self will leave the body through the “northern path” to the solar world. This is representative of a higher path and corresponds to Krishna’s words in the Bhagavad Gita when he urges Arjuna to leave the body through the crown chakra during the death experience. Leaving the body and following the northern path, we find we are freed from the cycle of birth, life and death that has been endlessly going on. To follow the northern path also means to realise that we are the Lord of Love and we are everywhere and cannot die because we are infinite. When we leave the body we will be free of fear and will ourselves in one of the higher astral (celestial realms), no longer incarnating into human life from compulsion and desire but having the conscious choice to do so or to remain in the astral realms. (8-10)

In the next few verses, we see the sun used to represent the light, the good and the auspicious. We see rayi described as the dark half of the month, the night time, worshipping in ignorance, sex used only for the sake of pleasure and more. In contrast, we see prana described as the light half of the month, the daylight, sex used as a spiritual force, wisdom and more. The two polarities represent the drive towards truth and the pull back into ignorance and it is always our choice to make which way we are heading. These powerful verses help us to remember this. (11-16)

Question 2

Next, it is Bhargava’s turn (the second student), to ask a question of the great sage and he inquires into the power that animates our human body. The answer that comes from Pippalada comes in the form of a story. Pippalada shows us that all of our bodily functions come from the prana and when prana leaves the body, so do all of these powers. Without prana animating our body we are unable to think, speak, see, hear or move the body. Prana is the source of everything we do with our body and is vital to its functioning. Without prana, we say that the body is dead and we can see there is no sentience in the body itself, instead the sentience that powers even the mind is from the prana itself. The analogy used in the story is that of worker bees following the queen. When the queen bee leaves the hive, all the workers leave too. Without prana, all the senses stop functioning, the heart does not beat and the mind cannot think. Prana is the first and very subtle manifestation arising out of the unmanifest Self. It is the power that drives all human actions, words and thoughts. Without it, the body is as inert as a rock. (1-4)

In the story, the powers of the body (speech, mind, vision etc) realised that prana was in charge of it all and began to sing a song in praise of it. Nothing can occur without prana here first and even the search for awakening can be seen as the expression of prana moving towards the light. Prana is formless but also appears as all of these forms, including our body, our thoughts and our lives. It is prana that creates life in the womb, as we read in verse 7. It is prana that allows a student to overcome the allure of sensory pleasures and become a living sage (verse 8). Prana moves as the forces of creator, protector and destroyer as it creates these forms, sustains them for as long as it wants to and then allows them to fall apart again (9).

Prana is also the breath and it sustains us on our journey in this human incarnation. What could be more fundamental for us than the ability to breathe in this powerful life force or prana? What could be a greater act of love for the body than to take a deep, nourishing breath? When that final inhalation comes and our body is no longer able to play host to the life force of prana anymore, it will leave the body with our final exhale. Prana kisses the body and breathes life into it. Prana embraces the body as it leaves for the last time. (10-13)

Question 3

The third student, Kausalya, asks his question next and elevates the conversation even more. His insightful thinking has realised that even prana must come from somewhere. He asks the great sage “Master, from what source does this prana come? How does he enter the body, how live after

dividing himself into five, how leave the body at the time of death? How does he support all that is without and all that is within?" Pippalada recognises that Kausalya is seeking Brahman with his penetrating questions and so gives him a very profound answer. He compares the Self and prana to a man and his shadow. The man cannot help but cast a shadow just as from the Self springs prana in the first of all forms. The Self isn't doing this deliberately or with any intention, it simply is the nature of the Self to arise as form. It is the nature of the Stillness to move into and as form, just as when we boil water, it is its nature to produce steam but it is not trying to do this, nor does it need to. The first forms that are produced from the Self are the most subtle and may even seem to be imperceptible. We can see the effects of prana and we know that without it the body would be dead but we cannot see prana itself. As our awakening deepens, we may become increasingly aware of prana moving through the body and we can begin to appreciate its power and creativity. (1-3)

Pippalada now answers the rest of Kausalya's questions by describing how prana divides itself into five, with four main other types of Prana that perform a specific function in the body and mind system. We will find descriptions of Prana, Apana, Samana, Vyana and Udana. Perhaps the most important to focus on as spiritual aspirants is the function of Udana upon death of the body as an awakened being. Death of the body is always caused by withdrawal of Prana from the body. There may be many statements or diagnoses on the death certificate for any being but the real cause is always Prana leaving the body because the Self has used the body for as long as it can and now the body is beginning to lose its integrity. The body will not be able to hold its shape together much longer and follows the natural law of entropy or movement away from order and towards chaos. When this happens, the Self can longer be hosted inside the body and it leaves for the final time. The Self leaves the body every night during sleep in a kind of projection of the subtle body or individual self. We can perhaps compare it to how much more relaxed we feel when we take off our daytime clothes and get into pyjamas. It is a beautiful thing to let the physical body fully relax and heal from the effect of the thoughts we've believed that day. The Self never fully leaves the body and leaves enough Prana in it to sustain it. At the time of death Prana completely leaves the body and this process is controlled by Udana. In those beings that have fully realised the Truth, Prana is moved up the subtle pathways in the spinal column, or the Sushumna nadi and out of the crown chakra and onto further evolution in the higher realms. For those who haven't fully awakened (or have not yet become interested in awakening to the Truth), Prana travels downwards and may leave through a lower chakra. Such beings will be drawn back to another human incarnation to begin or finish their awakening journey on the physical plane.

Pippalada finishes his answer to Kausalya with a direct reference to learn on how to consciously leave the body through the crown chakra at the time of death. Perhaps he senses that this is the root of this advanced student's question. A study of how prana enters the body, divides itself into 5 and finally leaves the body is essential for any being that would like to fully and consciously leave the body at the time of death and not slide back into amnesia of our real nature. Only once we know what Prana is, how it moves and how to focus it all in one place in the body may we consciously and lovingly exit the body at the right time. (5-12)

Question 4

Gargya is the fourth student to ask a question of the great sage and this question and answer reveals more about what the role of prana is in the body and what is different in the waking, dreaming and deep sleep states. Gargya asks who are all these different states happening to and what is the common factor in them all? Pippalada explains that during sleep the prana that functions in the body is gathered back up so that we do not pay attention to the senses, or even the thoughts. During dreams we experience any memories, desires or latent impressions upon the mind and these play out as if they were real. Sleep really is the condition where we are temporarily uninterested in the five senses. Deep sleep is when we are also not interested in the mind either, then only prana plays in the body to allow it to function, repair any damage and renew itself for the next day.

In a strange way, sleep is like a death experience, we see nothing through the senses, nothing in the mind and the body is lost to us for that time. We enjoy sleep but we fear death because we are unaware of the subtle body that functions as a template from which the physical body is made. We feel that we see with our physical eyes and have forgotten that the subtle body sees without eyes.

We fear death because we fear the end of experiencing but our physical experiences mirror and reflect the experiences of our subtle body. In sleep, at night time, the subtle body is free to play and explore different realms but when the waking state returns, we have no memory of it because we believe we are the physical body. Just as dreams seem real when we are having one and appear unreal when the waking state reappears; so does the subtle body and its experiences seem real while we are having them but we forget upon the waking state reappearing because we feel only the physical body is real. We can usually only experience the physical or the subtle body but not both at the same time until our awakening really begins to deepen. When this occurs, we will remember all our subtle (or astral) experiences and know exactly what will happen after death of the physical body. All fear will be gone. (1-8)

Pippalada tells Gargya that it is the Self that experiences the waking, dreaming and deep sleep states. It is the Self that takes itself to be a separate being and then imagines itself to be waking, dreaming or sleeping. Pippalada says "Those who know the Self, the seat of consciousness, in whom the breath and all the senses live, know all, gentle friend, and live in all." (9-10)

Question 5

Next it is Satyakama's turn to ask a question and he asks what happens to those established in the "AUM" mantra upon death of the physical body. The sage's answer is a description of the three sounds of the mantra and how they can be used separately or together to achieve different results. Pippalada says "AUM is both immanent and transcendent. Through it one can attain the personal and the impersonal."

To meditate on the "A" sound only will result in another human incarnation after this one, perhaps in a sattvic or spiritual family, where faith and love are valued. The vibration of the "A" becomes the dominant frequency of our subtle body when chanted and this determines our overall frequency as we shed the physical body. Upon leaving the body we will go to a very similar subtle or astral world to this physical earth and in time we will be drawn back involuntarily, due to our unfulfilled desires, to another human incarnation and another chance to realise the Self and fulfil our desires as the Self.

When we meditate on the "AU" sound, we go to the lunar world upon leaving our physical body for the last time. This is a higher subtle or astral realm where we can enjoy ourselves and many pleasures and may be compared to a kind of heaven. There are many types of heaven but in this case, we will only be a temporary visitor because our karmic merit will be spent in this astral world, enjoying ourselves and playing when the vibration has run its course. Finally, we will be drawn back to another human incarnation and another chance to realise the Self. In both of these options we will still feel we are a separate "someone". Even when our subtle body is released from its physical bodily home it still carries with it the idea that it is separate from all other beings and so this leads to fear, suffering and a desire to feel safe. When we realise the Self and our own Omnipresence, it is our subtle body that is realising it and not the physical body. The presence of a physical body simply gives us the sense of time, change and the duality of opposites so that we can begin to wake up out of it and see our karmic patterns clearer. The physical body enhances this sense of being a separate being and so allows us to work with the sense of opposites that are not as clear in the subtle realms.

Those who meditate on the "AUM" sound, says Pippalada, are led beyond all suffering, fear and karma to the solar world where they see the supreme Lord of Love (the Self) everywhere. Here, the subtle body can rest and stay indefinitely or is free to continue its astral evolution however it wants. It may even choose to return to earth in a physical form, free of the possibility of forgetting again, to help others. From here there are infinite choices to continue evolving and all are completely voluntary. (1-7)

Question 6

The final student, Sukesha, quotes a question he was asked about the Self and its 16 forms, to which he did not know the answer. Sukesha points to an important truth when he says "If I did, I would surely tell you; for he who speaks untruth perishes like a tree without roots." When we

deliberately say something that is not true (and that we know to be untrue) it temporarily diminishes the life-force of the body. We have all done this over the years and perhaps not noticed the effect it has on our subtle form or the drop in energy, as we awaken more to the Truth of our being we may begin to feel the effects of saying something we know to be untrue. Sukesha says we perish when based in untruth and we may see that this is highly possible if we continue to compound the effects of telling lies over many years, about many subjects. The effect of lots of untruths cuts off the life-force or prana to particular parts of the body and we may begin to see minor medical conditions that result. If severe enough we may even see chronic conditions in the body that reflect the energetic “dis-eases” (lack of harmonious energy flow) in the subtle body which is the template for the physical body.

The whole manifestation of our subtle form, mind, emotions, physical body and life is made of Truth. It is made, coalesced or condensed out of Truth or the Self and so any untruth is totally anti-life and all the organs and tissues of the body will feel disempowered slightly in that moment. We see this effect at the root of the science of kinesiology or muscle testing. When we think of something untrue our muscles are disempowered in that moment. This works even if we do not know it is untrue! The reverse is also true that if we make a true statement (or even just think it) then we have extra strength in that moment.

Perhaps when we read this, we may feel resistant to it or immune to it because we are studying the Upanishads here and we are obviously devoted to spiritual Truth. Let's consider that these untruths may not be vindictive or aimed at others, with the intent of hurting those beings, we have already evolved beyond wanting to cause harm to others in this or previous incarnations. The untruths we are concerned with here can be very different. What effect would it have on the physical body if we feel we are not good enough to awaken, or we live in shame and feel inadequate? Let's consider that effect too of believing these thoughts after we have seen that we are already the Self at least even once. We do not need to worry that we are going to hurt our body because the power of Truth is manifesting as prana and sustaining the physical body. We can understand from this though why our body never lies to us about what we are believing and immediately tells us when our vibration is lowered by some untruth. Unworthiness is not ever true and our body says “I do NOT like this idea”. (1-2)

Pippalada's answer to the question is to describe how prana manifested out of the Self as the essential life-force energy. “The Self asked himself, ‘What is it that makes me go if it goes and stay if it stays?’ So he created prana and from it desire.” From desire, Pippalada says, everything else arises, such as earth, fire, space and all the elements of manifestation. It is interesting that we use the word “desire” here because the root of the word means to give birth to something. To “sire” something is to be its source, parent or founder. The Self gives birth to prana, which then gives birth to the whole manifestation. (2-4)

“So all these sixteen forms (all the types of manifestation) disappear when the Self is realised. Then there is no more name and form for us and we attain immortality.” The sage does not mean that the forms literally disappear upon Self-realisation; instead, we realise each of the 16 forms to be non-different to the Self and of the same essence. We realise the whole of creation is simply the Self in disguise. When this is seen, we are eternally free.

May the power of the Prasna Upanishad set you free. OM shanti shanti shanti.