

The Light of lights

The *Upanishads* were compiled between 800 and 500 BC. These contain voluminous references to topics in religious mysticism. Clearly, the writers of these texts had witnessed the Divine Light and its ecstasy. The *Upanishads* spend a great deal of space devoted to this experience and what it means.

One of the principal texts in this collection -- the *Chandogya Upanishad* -- tells us of what we are likely to encounter after we die. In a dialogue between Prajapati, one of the main characters, and the god Indra, we are told that

...this body is mortal. It has been appropriated by Death. [But] it is the standing-ground of that deathless, bodiless Self (Atman)... that serene one, when he rises up from this body, reaches the highest light...¹

The *Yogakundalini Upanishad* adds that after a person's body "wears off," he or she attains "a disembodied state," after which the person "discards the body," as if "moving through the air."² The "highest light" that the emancipated "Self" reaches is Divine by nature. Divinity goes by many names in Hinduism (e.g., Indra, Vishnu, Siva, Purusha, Brahma, or Brahman). However, the tradition is very clear on the point that these are just different manifestations of one Divine reality. This divinity is "higher than the highest, greater than the great, and naturally brilliant," according to the *Naradaparivrajaka Upanishad*.³ Vishnu, so says the *Skanda Upanishad*, is the "Light of all Lights."⁴ The *Kaivalya Upanishad* goes on to identify the One who is formless, wonderful, all-pervading, indestructible and Lord of all:

*He only is Brahma.
He only is Indra.
He only is Vishnu.
He only is Self-Shining...⁵*

The "real seat of Vishnu," then, dawns on man "as the form of light."⁶ Brahman is seen as the light of an endless sphere.⁷ The "Brahman-OM" is "the highest light, the foundation and sovereign lord of all...."⁸ Brahma is light, says the *Maitri Upanishad*, and the mystic symbol OM is "a leader, brilliant, sleepless, ageless [and] deathless...."⁹ Brahma, "the limitless One," is that "shining form which gives heat in yonder sun.... Unending are the rays of him."¹⁰ Brahman is "self-shining," "self-luminous," and "shines by his own brightness." As He shines "does everything else shine after."¹¹ As we find in the *Brahmarahasya Upanishad*,

*Brahma is the Light of lights.
He is Self-luminous.
He is Supreme Light.
He is ultimate light.
He is an embodiment of Light.
By His Light all else shines.¹³*

Another of the great scriptures of Hinduism is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, written perhaps in the 2nd century B.C.¹⁴ The *Gita* deals with our topic in compelling fashion. According to this text, as with the *Upanishads*, the Light of the spiritual path is glorious and Divine:

*If there should be in the sky
A thousand suns risen all at once
Such splendour would be
Of the splendour of that Great Being.¹⁵*

This brilliance "illuminates the entire universe."¹⁶ Within the Divine light abides "supreme peace and the eternal abode."¹⁷ Whoever encounters this extraordinary light achieves "incomparable bliss,"¹⁸ and "the highest happiness... happiness beyond end."¹⁹ That this light is divine in origin is abundantly clear:

*With infinite power,
without beginning, middle or end,
With innumerable arms,
moon and sun eyed,
I see Thee, (with) Thy blazing,
oblation-eating mouth,
Burning all this universe
with Thine own Radiance...
Filling all the universe
with splendour,
Thy terrible rays consume it,
O Vishnu!²⁰*

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Hinduism

Experiencing Divine light and supreme bliss is not only well recognized in Hinduism, but is one of its ultimate goals. From Hinduism we gain a clear and abundant sense of the value that this tradition places on the subject at hand. Hindus discovered very early in their history the presence of this divine phenomenon, and have written about the sublime encounter extensively.

Hinduism derives its name from the inhabitants of the Indus River valley in Northwest India, and are therefore known as (H)-indus. Around 1500 BC, Aryan invaders from the north conquered the Indus valley. They brought with them the language of Sanskrit, which is used throughout the voluminous literature of classical Hinduism. This literature includes the mythical stories of the gods in the *Rg Veda*; the sacrificial rituals in the *Brahmanas* and the *Sama*, *Yajur*, and *Atharva Veda*; epic accounts in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*; the mysticism of the *Upanishads*; and the synthesis of all these in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The *Gita* is the latest of the collection, and was completed in the 2nd century BC.

Hinduism is a remarkably versatile religion, and for the most part very tolerant of differing religious views. The ultimate goal in most forms of Hinduism is to achieve liberation (*moksha*) from the material world. This can be accomplished in several ways. The way of *karma*, or action, emphasises exercises that are designed to physically untangle the spirit from the body. The way of *jnana*, or knowledge, would have one consider the true nature of reality in order to gain the ultimate goal. Lastly, the way of *bhakti*, or worship, allows one to pray either to a specific God or any number of gods, depending on the person and the situation.

However, in classical Hinduism, it is only appropriate for the priestly class, the *Brahmins*, to achieve *moksha* in this life. Otherwise, if one is born of a lower class, then one must properly perform the duties of that class, and the caste within the class, in order to be reincarnated into the next level above. Failure to do so could result in one being reincarnated lower in the social order, or even into the animal world. The righteous *Sudra*, or working class, would then aspire to ascend to the *Vaisya*, or Mercantile class; the *Vaisya* to the *Kshatriya*, or ruling class; and the *Kshatriya* to the *Brahmin* class. The *Brahmin* who performs all the duties that can be expected might achieve this final release from an otherwise endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Hinduism has several major schools of thought. The Nyaya and Vaishesika schools hold that a personal Creator has arranged particulate forms of matter (atoms, if you will) to form the cosmos. The Mimamsa school emphasises the role of ritual, and familiarity with the Vedic scriptures. The Sankhya system emphasizes the achievement of liberation through proper thinking. Yoga emphasises proper action, through exercises and meditation, to achieve *moksha*. Vedanta sees a divine reality that transcends the everyday world of the senses, and deals with the relationship between God (*Brahman*) and the soul (*Atman*).

Within Vedanta, views differ considerably about what the relationship between Brahman and Atman means. The 9th century philosopher Sankara maintained that Brahman and Atman are ultimately identical. Ramanuja, in the 12th century, held that the two are at once distinct and united, just like the body and the soul. In the 13th century, Madva proposed that *Brahman* and *Atman* are completely distinct.

The 19th century saw several outstanding Hindu philosophers and reformers. Ram Mohan Roy re-emphasized the importance of religious devotion and worship. Ramakrishna saw a single divine reality underlying all of the world's faiths. Mahatma Ghandi sought to reform the social order through non-violent revolution. Aurobindo, after having been imprisoned for taking part in violent attacks against the British in Bengal, had a religious experience which inspired him to wed Hindu spirituality with modern science.

As far as Hindu mysticism is concerned, one does not need to look far to investigate the experience under examination. The Hindu scriptures themselves, particularly the *Upanishads*, are rich with such literature. The encounter with light and ecstasy is as deep and profound in this tradition as one can find in any other, modern

The Bliss

In Hinduism, encountering God often involves deep feelings of rapture and bliss. The *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* tells us that "he whose world is Brahman becomes an ocean, the one seer, free from duality.... This is his highest bliss."²¹ In other *Upanishads* we find that this "supreme bliss" is held very dear by Yogins.²² Brahman is "the all-illuminating, the bliss greater than the great, the form of eternal bliss... the supreme nectary essence." He is also "the great one of the nature of bliss, that which illuminates all illuminaries."²³ The Yogin who comes to realize Brahman "becomes immersed in an ocean of bliss." That "brightness which is indescribable" is also "the nature of unrivalled bliss."²⁴

Whoever reaches this "all-pervading" and "ever resplendent" source of all light also enjoys "supreme bliss by his attaining the state of Brahma."²⁵ The "wise who perceive Him" come to realize that "'this is it'." Thus "they recognize the highest, indescribable happiness."²⁶ The "blissful Immortal that gleams forth" can be seen by the wise.²⁷ Once one is capable of "seeing the real bliss-form through Yoga," then "even in the burial ground, life is in the garden of bliss."²⁸

Hindu scriptures other than the *Upanishads* agree on this point. The *Vedanta Sutra* states quite plainly that "God is All-Bliss."²⁹ The *Yoga Sutras* claim that this highest realization is "the acquisition of extreme happiness."³⁰ According to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, knowledge of the Divine leads the devotee to "supreme peace."³¹ The Hindu sage Ramanuja, commenting on the *Upanishads*, agrees that Brahman possesses "infinite bliss."³²

The *Upanishads* go on to claim that light and bliss are essential components of the human soul. This "soul (*Atman*) is obtainable by truth.... Within the body, consisting of Light, true is He...."³³ Similarly, "the light of man is the soul."³⁴ Atma (or Atman) is "the nature of the *jyotis* (light)... illuminating all."³⁵ This Atma is "golden or effulgent Light into which all the universe is absorbed."³⁶ The "Self-Light alone" is "immaculate,"³⁷ and Atman "shines by Its own light...."³⁸ Knowledge of the Self (which is Atman) leads to *moksha* (liberation), which is "the entire removal of all kinds of pain and the attainment of Supreme Bliss."³⁹ For the true seeker of Divine knowledge, "the self alone becomes his light."⁴⁰ The Atma is "the nature of happiness, which is Supreme Bliss."⁴¹ The same point is made poetically in the *Kundika Upanishad*:

*Stirred by the wind of Illusion
the waves of the whole universe
Repeatedly rise and fall
within me, the ocean of bliss.*⁴²

The *Upanishads* say that God and the human soul both have characteristics of light and bliss because Brahman

and Atman are essentially the same. In a famous commentary on the nature of truth, the *Chandogya Upanishad* relates the following:

*That which is the finest essence --
this whole world has that as its soul.
That is Atman. That art thou, Svetaketu.*⁴³

This point is made even more explicitly in the *Maitreya Upanishad*:

*I am free from space and time.
Mine is the joy of the unclad...
My form consists of total light;
The light of pure consciousness am I.*⁴⁴

The same *Upanishad* goes on to say that "the light which shines higher than this heaven... is the same as this light which is here within a person."⁴⁵ The *Taittiriya Upanishad* spells out that "the knower of the unity of the human person with the Universal Being attains unhampered desire."⁴⁶ The latter *Upanishad* goes on to make the same point in verse:

*Oh Wonderful! Oh Wonderful! Oh Wonderful!
... I am the first-born of the world order;
Earlier than the gods,
in the navel of immortality!*

*Who gives me away,
he indeed has aided me!
I, who am food,
eat the eater of food!
I have overcome the whole world!*⁴⁷

Other *Upanishads* tell us that "this shining immortal person who exists as a human being -- he is just this Soul, this Immortal, this Brahma, this All."⁴⁸ That which "disappears in Indra becomes Indra only... that which disappears in bliss becomes bliss only."⁴⁹ Another inquires, "May I behold that light which is thy loveliest form! He who is that Purusha, he I am!"⁵⁰ The *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* makes the same point quite explicitly:

*This self is like honey to all creatures.
All creatures are like honey to this self.
And that Person in this self,
who consists of light,
who consists of immortality,
that indeed is he who is that self.
This is the immortal.
This is Brahman.
This is the All.*⁵¹

Similarly, the *Maitreya Upanishad* makes very clear identification of the soul with God, in several verses:

*I am Siva...
I am the Seer of all...
I am the emancipated One...
I am the Light...*

*There is no doubt that he who has realized himself
thus, is Myself.
Whoever hears (this) once becomes himself Brahman,
yea, he becomes himself Brahman.
Thus is the Upanishad.⁵²*

*The Supreme Being, who is eternal,
pure, enlightened, free, true,
subtle, all-pervading, unique,
and an ocean of bliss,
-- I am He, the inner essence.
Of this I have no doubt.⁵³*

Among the most compelling statements to this effect are found in the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

Also this is said to be

*the light of lights
That is beyond darkness;
It is knowledge,
the object of knowledge
and that which is to be
attained through knowledge.*

*It is seated in the hearts of all...
For I am the foundation of Brahman,
Of the Immortal and the Imperishable,
And of everlasting virtue,
And of absolute bliss.⁵⁴*

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The Hindu Path to Light and Bliss

To perceive this Light of all lights and ultimate bliss, the Hindu tradition has several methods for the attainment of the same. The author of the *Katha Upanishad* says that those who say, "'That is this' (i.e., the soul is Brahman), think of the indescribable supreme happiness." The same author then goes on to ask, "How then may I come to know of it?"⁵⁵

In Yoga, the emphasis is on physical and mental preparation. Various exercises have been devised to prepare the physical body for Divine realization. But unlike some of the "Yoga" that is being practised in the West, in the Hindu tradition Yoga is much more than just a "get fit" class. One is expected to do considerably more than just perform a series of stretching exercises. All that is preliminary. The encounter with light and bliss comes through inward meditation. In Hatha Yoga, one of the last steps toward Divine realization is

*With a steady mind and half closed eyes,
fixed on the tip of the nose...
He who can see the light which is the all,
the seed, the entire brilliant,
...approaches Him, who is the great object.*⁵⁶

Similarly, in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, we find that "the undisturbed flow of the ultra-meditative causes Subjective Luminosity."⁵⁷ Through proper techniques, the Yogi is able to obtain "knowledge of the subtle, the veiled, the remote...."⁵⁸ Finally, the Yogi is able to attain the goal of the quest, when "the cover of light is destroyed."⁵⁹

The *Bhagavad-Gita* tells us that the path to Divine realization is through appropriate effort, concentration, and the renunciation of material concerns:

*He whose self is unattached
to external sensations
Who finds happiness in the self,
Whose self is united with Brahman
through Yoga
Reaches imperishable happiness.*

*Thus, continually disciplining himself,
The Yogin whose mind is subdued
Goes to Nirvana, to supreme peace,
To union with me.*⁶⁰

The Upanishads echo many of the same sentiments. The seeker of Divine Light is asked to "meditate solely on Brahman, which is Self-luminous and all-pervading."⁶¹ A wandering ascetic who has renounced material possessions "is truly rich, for, with the thought, 'I am He,' he transcends both knowledge and ignorance, both pleasure and pain. He shines with his own light."⁶² When "worldly wisdom is destroyed... diffusing itself everywhere... He himself shines always within, like a light within a vessel."⁶³ The devotee is encouraged to "meditate in the middle of the lotus of the heart, Parames'wara (the highest Lord),... who is the object of supreme love... alone being of the nature of light only."⁶⁴

Hinduism is in fact very versatile on this issue. The path of devotion, such as one would find when a Jew or a Christian prays to and worships God, is a perfectly appropriate way of coming nearer to the Divine. Most Hindus do pray to a God or several gods. Appropriate as well is the path of jnana (knowledge), which is preferred by those of a philosophical persuasion. Which method, or even which tradition one chooses depends

on the individual. As Sri Ramakrishna put it, many roads lead to the top of the mountain -- just get yourself onto one of those roads if you hope to make progress.

The ultimate identification of the soul with God might cause some consternation amongst some Westerners. In the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, such statements are considered blasphemous. But as we shall see when we come to the Western mystical traditions, while no complete identification is made, the "gulf" between God and man is certainly narrowed considerably.

Regardless, these concerns should not obscure the clear and obvious conclusion that, in this chapter, we have been looking at a core human experience with supernatural light and accompanying ecstasy. A number of Hindu scriptures convey expressions of this profound encounter over and over again in a compelling, even awesome fashion. Even within Hinduism, interpretations differ as to exactly what this means, as do the names that are attached to this rapturous illumination. There is no doubt, however, that the experience of the supreme bliss and brilliance of the Divine is firmly rooted in the Hindu tradition.

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