The Upanishads

A Complete Guide

Editor(s): Signe Cohen

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Review

Signe Cohen has done a marvelous job of editing and authoring the majority of the chapters in *The Upanishads*, giving readers a rich treatment of the history, culture, and philosophy contained within them. Her introduction sheds light on many aspects of the Upanishads. It is interesting, though, that while she analyzes the meaning of the word “Upanishad” based on interpretations of scholars like Hermann Oldenberg, Paul Deussen, Gunilla Gren-Eklund, Harry Falk, Patrick Olivelle, and Michael Witzel, she completely avoids the meaning given by Shankaracharya in his commentary on the *Katha Upanishad*, where he explains that the *shad* part of the word means “the loosening up of bondage.”

While discussing the dates of the Upanishads and giving a chronological listing of some Upanishads, Cohen does not cite any authority for the basis of this dating. Also, she does not explain why she prefers to date the Upanishads much later than the widely-accepted date of the oldest Veda, the Rigveda. She places the Upanishads after the Zend-Avesta, which was authored much later than the Rigveda. Cohen does not explain why she has apparently divorced the Upanishads from the Rigveda, which contains many Upanishads.

Another interesting aspect of *The Upanishads* is that most interpretations are based on contemporary standards of scholarship and do not take into account the different standards that could have prevailed during the time of the authorship of the Upanishads, which was several millennia ago. While commenting on the authorship of the Upanishads, Cohen takes the popular academic stance that diverse and linguistically rich texts could not originate from a single author: “Many ancient Indian texts, even those that are so vast and contain such metrically and linguistically diverse material that they can hardly be attributed to a single author, are ascribed to mythical sages and poets” (18).

Cohen religiously avoids citing translations from early Indian or monastic scholars, whose translations played a pioneering and pivotal role in the spread of the Upanishads among Anglophone readers. Hence, translators like Swami Gambhirananda, Swami Nikhilananda, Swami Chinmayananda, and Ganganath Jha are not mentioned. In his chapter “The Upanishads and the *Bhagavadgita*,” Simon Brodbeck rectifies this to some extent by leaning on traditional interpretations. He cites Swami Gambhirananda’s translation of Shankaracharya’s commentary on the *Katha Upanishad* when explaining the meaning of *shad* in the word “Upanishad.” This chapter is an insightful textual study with a varied and impressive list of references. *The Upanishads* begins with verse translations of some select Upanishadic statements by Dermot Killingley. While this may
have creative merit, the meaning is lost to the reader. A prose translation would have been much more comprehensible.

Cohen does a very good job of analyzing the Mandukya Upanishad, particularly in giving a neuroscience-based explanation. However, it would have been better if she had cited Evan Thompson’s pioneering work Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy (Columbia University Press, 2014), which discusses the Mandukya Upanishad in light of neuroscience. The chapters on the individual classical Upanishads serve as short academic introductions to the texts.

Devoting an entire chapter to “Dara Shikoh and the First Translation of the Upanishads,” Cohen discusses the history of the Persian translation and its transmission, which led to a flurry of translations into many more languages. Dermot Killingley, in his chapter “The Upanishads and Later Hinduism,” reminds us of Swami Vivekananda’s plan to “propagate the Upanishads” (219) and explains how the online availability of Upanishadic texts has led to “Vivekananda’s vision [being] … partially fulfilled: the Upanishads are now common property, for anyone who wants them, not only in India but among the worldwide Hindu diaspora, or anyone in search of spirituality” (227).

The spectrum of topics covered in The Upanishads is quite wide and almost exhaustive: rituals, Upanishads and Buddhism, caste and gender, prominent characters, atman, brahman, karma, rebirth, knowledge, liberation, episteme, mantras, theism, yoga, Bhagavad Gita, Mahabharata, translation, and even Arthur Schopenhauer’s engagement with the Upanishads.

The Upanishads gives surprisingly in-depth analyses of fourteen classical Upanishads and five classes of later Upanishads. Forty-two short yet incisive chapters divided into five sections: “Composition, Authorship, and Transmission of the Upanishads”; “The Historical, Cultural, and Religious Background of the Upanishads”; “Religion and Philosophy in the Upanishads”; “The Classical Upanishads”; and “The Later Upanishads,” which make The Upanishads a feast to read. One can effortlessly gain academic insight into this ancient corpus of metaphysical knowledge through this book. It can be used as a companion for studies of the Upanishads by scholars and laypeople alike. This book fills the gap of well-researched academic introductions to the Upanishads.

About the Reviewer(s):
Swami Narasimhananda is the editor of Prabuddha Bharata.

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