



# A Pathway to Social Harmony and Peaceful co-existence as reflected in Principal Upaniṣads

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## **Abstract:**

The Upaniṣads are revered as the foundation of Indian philosophy, representing the pinnacle of Vedic wisdom. These texts guide humanity in multifaceted ways, transcending their philosophical nature to play a crucial role in fostering societal peace. The mantras of the Upaniṣads are seen as instruments for establishing social harmony, concord, and peaceful coexistence. This paper explores select Upanishadic mantras to delve into their essence of inclusivity. Ultimately, the Upaniṣads are instrumental in cultivating inner peace and promoting harmony not only within individuals but also across societies, nations, and globally.

## **Keywords:**

Upaniṣads, communal harmony, social harmony, peaceful co-existence, global harmony

## **Introduction:**

Upaniṣads are regarded as the zenith of Vedic literature. They speak about the unity of the Jivātman and Paramātman. Upaniṣads are not texts meant for a particular religion, caste, gender or nation but they are for humankind. Peace and harmony with oneself facilitate peaceful co-existence with the world around us. Upaniṣads have been studied and interpreted by different scholars. Renowned scholars and philosophers like S. Radhakrishnan, Paul Deussen, T. M. P. Mahadevan etc undertook extensive research on Upaniṣads. Spiritual gurus like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Chinmayananda have derived inspiration from these texts to preach the unity between the individual Self and God. This paper aims at interpreting and reinterpreting mantras of Upaniṣads as guiding principles for social harmony. The paper focuses on three main points namely the concept of Supreme reality, the unity of beings and the value system of Upaniṣads.

## **a) Concept of Supreme Reality-**

Upanishadic texts revolve around ultimate reality called Brahman or Paramātman. It reveals the nature of Supreme reality as one without the second, all-pervasive and without distinctions. This principle becomes the creator of all beings. All these philosophical factors are keys to social harmony.

### 1) One supreme reality

Principal Upaniṣads propound that there is one Ultimate reality without any distinctions. KaṭhUp says that Supreme reality or God who is the sole inner controller which becomes multifarious. Those who understand this thought can attain eternal peace but not others.<sup>1</sup> Generally dispute regarding religion occurs due to difference in the name of God. KaṭhUp says that one reality gets manifold in different forms. Those who do not comprehend this reality attain sorrow whereas wise people know the unity and attain bliss. Disturbance in social unity takes place due to comprehension of discrimination in name of religion and castes. Thus, discrimination results in sorrow and sufferings of all. If one understands that there is only one reality and distinctions in case of names, forms are just manifestations of the same Supreme Reality then there cannot be any scope for dispute. Just as fire though one assumes different forms in respect of colour and shape when enters into this world (due to its fuel) similarly inner soul though one looks different due to different forms (due to body etc. limiting adjuncts).<sup>2</sup> Similar idea is explicated through illustration of wind and Sun.<sup>3</sup> Supreme reality is one and all pervading but has assumed manifold forms. These examples illustrate about how to see unity in manifold and diverse universe. It proves that it is illogical to divide Supreme Reality or principle of God in different religions.

### 2) All pervasive:

The opening mantra of ÍśaUp mentions that Íśā principle exists in each and everything in this world.<sup>4</sup> Here the word Íśā is not referring to particular godhead. The word Íśā is derived from Sanskrit root to govern. Íśā or Íśvara means governing principle of the Universe.

God does not even discriminate between human beings and non-human beings. This Upanishadic statement functions as a guiding statement for non-discrimination of human beings based on religion, gender and caste. Each and everything existing in this world becomes equally important and valuable as there is no scope for discrimination pertaining to any factor. Supreme principle is omnipresent; therefore it encompasses everything in this world. Every being is divine and therefore cannot be inferior at all. Supreme principle being all-pervasive rules out the possibility of discrimination in whichever the god principle resides.

### 3) Without distinctions:

Supreme reality cannot be divided into many. Different names and forms cannot be criteria for the classification of divinity or people. God cannot be called distinct as pertaining to different religions. Yajñavalkya explains to Maitreyī in Br̥Up that the nature of Supreme reality is without any distinctions. Just as various kinds of smoke are produced from fire due to different kind of fuels; similarly different beings are created by all-pervasive reality. Everything existing in this world is just It's breathing.<sup>5</sup> The difference in smoke is just due to the difference in fuel. Similarly, difference in beings which is apparent is just due to limiting adjuncts like form and qualities of body. Similarly, differences pertaining to religion are superficial. Supreme Self which exists in all is one without any superficial distinctions.

#### 4) Source of all beings:

Equality can be propounded on the basis that the source of all beings is one and the same. Everything in this world is the manifestation of the Supreme Self. BrUp says only Brahman was existent in the beginning. From Brahman emerged everything.<sup>6</sup> AitUp says – There was only Ātman (absolute Self) in the beginning. There was nothing else whatsoever that winked. It thought ‘let me create many.’<sup>7</sup> BrUp gives illustrations of spider and fire. Just as a spider produces threads or fire emits sparks similarly this Supreme Self issues Prāṇas, lokas, devas and all beings.<sup>8</sup> The source and final destination of all beings is one as said in MāṇḍUp.<sup>9</sup> MuṇḍUp utters the same fact that all beings get unified in Supreme Imperishable.<sup>10</sup> As stated in BrUp- This same Self is the ruler of all beings and the king of all beings. Just as all spokes are fixed in the nave and the fellow of a chariot wheel, even so, are all beings, all gods, all worlds, all organs and all these individual selves fixed in this Supreme Self.<sup>11</sup> MuṇḍUp says that-‘from Him emerges seas, mountains, rivers, herbs and their essence. He lives in them as their inner soul.’<sup>12</sup> If the source of all beings is the same then there is no point of discrimination. The distinction is based on ignorance, only right knowledge directs one to understand that there is no scope for discrimination.

#### b) Unity of beings:

There are different factors based on which social discrimination is followed. Criteria like gender, caste, and religion do not exist when the unity of all beings is understood in philosophical terms. Unity of all beings including humans, animals or any other beings can be understood based on following principles-

##### 1) Inner controller:

BrUp says that the Supreme Self dwells in all beings and It resides within them. That principle is called antaryāmī i.e. inner controller, all beings are the body of the Supreme Self.<sup>13</sup> KaṭhUp says that –Puruṣa (indwelling self) resides inside the body of all. He is ever seated in the hearts of beings.<sup>14</sup> Then the question can be raised about how there is a visible difference in beings if the same ātman resides in all. This idea is illustrated in MuṇḍUp - just as there are spokes of the wheel centred on the navel of the wheel. Similarly, that Supreme Self though resides inside of all beings looks manifold.<sup>15</sup> It is said further that one should focus on this very ātman.<sup>16</sup> Here this can be interpreted in the present context that though there is difference in beings, there is underlying unity due to indwelling Supreme self and therefore one should not ignore this Self. This is the key towards communal harmony. This fact is formulised by mahāvākya Tattvamasi (That thou art) given in ChāUp.<sup>17</sup> Āruṇi explains this mahāvākya with different illustrations to Śvetaketu.

##### 2) Distinctions are illusory:

KaṭhUp says that one shouldn't observe the manifold nature of reality or beings. One who does so goes from death to death.<sup>18</sup> MāṇḍUp propounds equality of all beings on the principle of unity between jīva and ātman. It says that the identity of jīva and ātman is praised in scriptures whereas multiplicity is condemned. This is the rational thought.<sup>19</sup> Difference or multiplicity is understood when body is taken as real or jīva is taken as different from ātman.

ÍśaUp says that when one sees all beings in the self and self in the all beings then there is no feeling of aversion.<sup>20</sup> Śaṅkarācārya comments on the same that such a person sees everything in the world as his self

and sees nothing else without the self.<sup>21</sup> It means that this kind of outlook towards all eradicates the feeling of āpa-para bhāva i.e. he is mine and someone else is not mine. Hatred arises when there is a false perception of a self as different from the other. In fact, there is no delusion and sorrow for one who sees the Supreme self in all beings.<sup>22</sup> Unity is not restricted to human beings but it's applicable to all beings which rules out any idea of differentiation. This mantra is a guiding principle for developing cordial relations with members of the society irrespective of any communal difference.

BṛUp clearly eradicates the difference between varṇas or classes or castes as a criterion of superiority or inferiority. This reference is a formulaic expression for establishing communal harmony at the highest level. It says that – ‘the Brāhmaṇa rejects him who knows the Brāhmaṇa to be different from self. Kṣatriya rejects him who knows the Kṣatriya to be different from himself. The world rejects him who considers world to be different from the self. God rejects him who considered God as a different from self. All rejects him who knows all as different from the self.’ Therefore, Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, world, God, everything should be known as this Self.<sup>23</sup> Differences in terms of caste, sects, and cults are superficial when everything is nothing but this self.

In KaṭhUp II. 1. 10-11, Yama tells to Naciketas that the failure to comprehend the essential unity of being is the cause of re-birth. Discrimination between human beings is the play of mind. In fact, it is the perception of plurality which gives rise to discrimination and the complexes of superiority and inferiority. In reality, there is no distinction, for all individual selves are regarded as one.

MāṇḍUp says duality ceases to exist when the Highest truth is known.<sup>24</sup> Difference is just illusory and unity of all is the Highest truth. Duality is due to māyā (ignorance) and advaita (non-dualism) is the true reality.<sup>25</sup> Ephemeral differences get destroyed at the time of dissolution of limiting adjuncts. Just as space in the pot gets merged in outer space after the destruction of pot similarly jīvas get merged into self after the destruction of body etc.<sup>26</sup> This mantra asks to see the unity rather than seeing differences which are illusory and temporary and unreal.

ChāUp explains the superficiality of all distinctions with beautiful illustrations. Śvetaketu explains the nature of Supreme Reality with the example of clay and its products. Different objects like pots made out of clay are different in shapes and sizes and they are innumerable. Though this is so, they just differ in name and form. When one understands the principle of ‘clay’, everything made up of clay is understood.<sup>27</sup> All distinctions in this world arise due to differences in ‘name’ and ‘form’. When names and forms perish what remains is the real source. Human beings feel divided due to differences in their identities. This identity is associated with birth, work, religion, caste, complexion etc. All this is superficial because inner soul of all beings is same and distinction is false.



### c) Value system of Upaniṣads :

Values reflected in Upaniṣads gives the message of peace to the entire world. Society should focus on preaching certain values which are useful for bringing peace to society. One should focus on the value system given by Upaniṣads for developing harmonious relations with others in society.

#### 1) Empathy:

Feelings like hatred, enmity or envy have no place when there does not exist any difference. When another being is different then there is a place for negative feelings. BrUp IV.5.15 has a dialogue between Yajñavalkya and Maitreyī. Yajñavalkya explains the idea of unity very beautifully with an impressive phraseology of words. ‘When there is duality then one sees another, one smells another, one tastes another, one speaks of another, one hears another, one thinks of another, one teaches another, one knows the other. In case of one for whom everything has become the very self then what one should see, smell, taste, speak, teach or know and with what? By knowing what, everything becomes known? That is ātman which is indescribable, imperceptible and cannot get decayed or attached. It doesn’t suffer or perish.’ This is the highest philosophical principle which leads to liberation but has practical application too. One can develop the feeling Vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam (whole world is family) with this philosophical principle. If one considers all beings as own family members, then there is love rather than hatred. One can empathise with the fellow being and society in general.

IśaUp says- one should enjoy (bhoga) after tyāga. Here Upaniṣad reconciles tyāga and bhoga and gives a warning that one shouldn’t snatch others’ wealth.<sup>28</sup> This mantra asks to share some portion before enjoying it for self. The attitude of empathy towards a fellow being is preached. Similarly, one should remain contented in one’s portion and should not keep an eye on others’ share. Many a times, the cause of hatred is due to the claim of people over things owned by others or other groups or a particular group. This can be resolved with the above mantra which says that first, you have to give some amount of your share to others before enjoying the same. Mantra advises empathising with others.

#### 2) Discriminative intellect:

The allegory of chariot in KaṭhUp exemplifies how rational thinking results in achieving the final destination. It says that one who has discriminative intellect attains the final goal.<sup>29</sup> Otherwise, one deviates from the right path. Society in general need to develop a rational attitude towards social issues. Bias and preconceived notions often create discord in society.

#### 3) Open mindedness:

KaṭhUp says that when all the knots of the heart are destroyed then mortal becomes immortal.<sup>30</sup> This mantra can be interpreted as developing the attitude open mindedness. One should have open-mindedness while living in society. If there are certain grudges regarding the people of other communities or religions then it will not result in healthy relations. When one has knots i.e. certain preconceptions regarding religion then it is difficult to attain harmony. Open-mindedness to know the right knowledge about others’ religions is

appreciated. It can help people for knowing about different religions and have healthy interactions with each other. It can pave the way for Interfaith and Interreligious dialogue.

#### 4) Quest for right knowledge:

There is a convocation address given by guru in TaiUp. The preceptor imparts instructions to students by saying that ‘speak the truth, follow righteousness, don’t break self-study etc.’<sup>31</sup> Here qualities like speaking the truth, good conduct and attention towards studies are expected to be followed throughout life. Often falsehood, bad conduct and negligence to right knowledge disturb the harmony and peace of society. Therefore, this convocation address is very much relevant even in modern days.

There is seen as a quest for the right knowledge in Upaniṣads. Naciketas, Maitreyī, Śvetaketu all aspire for true knowledge. Naciketas rejects all material pleasures for the sake of ātmajñāna (true knowledge of self) and he became the disciple of Yama. Maitreyī also denied wealth for the sake of true knowledge of immortality and became the disciple of Yajñavalkya. Śvetaketu and his father Āruṇi became disciples of King Pravahaṇa Jaivali for attaining the knowledge of Pañcāgnividyā. When there is the quest for knowing the truth then society progresses. There are many people in the society who present and spread distorted or partial truth to the masses. They sometimes provoke society by presentation of false knowledge about religious history or religious principles. There can be right education if there is quest for true knowledge of one’s own religion as well as others’ religion.

#### Conclusions:

Upanishadic philosophy aims at the highest philosophical goal of liberation. Though Upaniṣads are discourse on liberation (mokṣa), philosophical principles serve as a key to solve social problems. Upanishadic standpoint of unity and equality rules out the idea of discrimination whereas it unfolds the secret of how the entire world can get together. Interfaith dialogue is the solution to different crises happening due to communal disharmony. Upanishadic ideas have practical implications in having interreligious dialogue. Upaniṣads not being restricted to any religion or cult preach the message of individual peace which results in global peace. It gives different means of attaining liberation by which a person goes beyond pleasures and pain derived from temporary bondages. Eternal inner peace can give unshakable outer peace. Upaniṣads focus on wholesome development in the form of physical, psychological and spiritual development of an individual and the universe. This type of tri-dimensional development is a definite pathway towards global harmony and peaceful co-existence.

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## References:

<sup>1</sup> *KathUp* II.2.12

एको वशी सर्वभूतान्तरात्मा एकं रूपं बहुधा यः करोति ।  
तमात्मस्थं येऽनुपश्यन्ति धीरास्तेषां सुखं शाश्वतं नेतरेषाम् ॥

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* II.2.9

अग्निर्यथैको भुवनं प्रविष्टो रूपं रूपं प्रतिरूपो बभूव ।  
एकस्तथा सर्वभूतान्तरात्मा रूपं रूपं प्रतिरूपो बहिश्च ॥

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* II.2.10,11

<sup>4</sup> *ĪśaUp* 1a

ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।

<sup>5</sup> *BrUp* IV.5.11

स यथाद्रैधाग्नेरभ्याहितस्य पृथग्धूमा विनिशरन्ति, एवं वा अरेऽस्य महतो भूतस्य निःश्वसितम् एतद्...अयं च लोकः परश्च लोकः सर्वाणि च  
भूतानि अस्य एवैतानि सर्वाणि निःश्वसितानि ।

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* I.4.10

ब्रह्म वा इदमग्र आसीत्...तस्मात्सर्वमभवत् ।

<sup>7</sup> *AitUp* I.1.1

आत्मा वा इदमेक एवाग्र आसीत् । नान्यत् किञ्चन मिषत् । स्स ईक्षत लोकान्नु सृजा इति ॥

<sup>8</sup> *BrUp* II.1.20

स यथोर्णनाभिसतन्तुनोच्येत् यथाग्नेः क्षुद्रा विस्फुल्लिङ्गा व्युच्चरन्ति एवमेवास्मादात्मनः सर्वे प्राणाः सर्वे लोकाः सर्वे देवाः सर्वाणि  
भूतानि व्युच्चरन्ति ।

<sup>9</sup> *MāndUp* 6

एष सर्वेश्वर एष सर्वज्ञ हि एषोऽन्तर्याम्येष योनिः सर्वस्य प्रभवाप्ययौ हि भूतानाम् ।

<sup>10</sup> *MundUp* III.2.7 d

परेऽव्यये सर्वे एकीभवन्ति ।

<sup>11</sup> *BrUp* II.5.15

स वा आत्मा सर्वेषां भूतानामधिपतिः, सर्वेषां भूतानां राजाः, तद्यथा रथनाभौ च रथनेमौ चाराः सर्वे समर्पिताः एवमेवास्मिन्नत्मनि सर्वाणि  
भूतानि सर्वे देवाः सर्वे लोकाः सर्वे प्राणाः सर्वे एते आत्मानः समर्पिताः ।

<sup>12</sup> *MundUp* II.1.9

अतः समुद्रा गिरयश्च सर्वेऽस्मात्स्यन्दने सिन्धवः सर्वरूपाः ।

अतश्च सर्वा ओषधयो रसाश्च येनैष भूतैस्तिष्ठते ह्यन्तरात्मा ॥

<sup>13</sup> *BrUp* III.7.14

यः सर्वेषु भूतेषु तिष्ठन् सर्वेभ्यो भूतेभ्योऽभ्यन्तरः, यं सर्वाणि भूतानि न विदुः, यस्य सर्वाणि भूतानि शरीरम्, यः सर्वाणि भूतान्यन्तरो  
यमयति, एष त आत्मान्तर्याम्यमृतः इत्यधिभूतम् अथाध्यत्मम् ॥

<sup>14</sup> *KathUp* II.3.7

अङ्गुष्ठमात्रः पुरुषोऽन्तरात्मा सदा जनानां हृदये सन्निविष्टः ॥

<sup>15</sup> *MundUp* II.2.6 ab

अरा इव रथनाभौ संहता यत्र नाड्यः स एषोऽन्तश्चरते बहुधा जायमानः ।

<sup>16</sup> *MundUp* II.2.6c

<sup>17</sup> *ChāUp* VI.8.7

स आत्मा तत्त्वमसि श्वेतकेतो ।

<sup>18</sup> *BrUp* IV.4.19 b

मृत्योः स मृत्युमाप्नोति य इह नानेव पश्यति ।

<sup>19</sup> *MāndUp* III.13

जीवात्मनोरन्यत्वमभेदेन प्रशस्यते ।

नानात्वं निन्द्यते यच्च तदेव हि समञ्जसम् ॥

<sup>20</sup> *ÍśaUp* 6

यस्तु सर्वाणि भूतानि आत्मन्येवानुपश्यति ।

सर्वभूतेषु चात्मानं ततो न विजुगुप्सते ॥

<sup>21</sup> Śaṅkara on *ÍśaUp* 6

यस्तु परिव्राट् मुमुक्षुः सर्वाणि भूतानि अव्यक्तादीनि स्थावरान्तानि आत्मन्येव अनुपश्यति, आत्मव्यतिरिक्तानि न पश्यतीत्यर्थः ।

सर्वा हि घृणा आत्मनोऽन्यद्दृष्टं पश्यतो न घृणानिमित्तमर्थान्तरमस्तीति प्राप्तमेव ततो न विजुगुप्सते ।

<sup>22</sup> *ÍśaUp* 7

यस्मिन्सर्वाणि भूतानि आत्मैवाभूद्विजानतः ।

तत्र को मोहः कः शोकः एकत्वमनुपश्यतः ॥

<sup>23</sup> *BrUp* II.46

ब्रह्म तं परादायोऽन्यत्रात्मनो ब्रह्म वेद.....इदं ब्रह्म इदं क्षत्रम् इमे लोकाः इमे देवा इमानि भूतानि इदं सर्वं यदयमात्मा ।

<sup>24</sup> *MāṇḍUp* I.7 (18)

विकल्पो विनिवर्तत कल्पितो यदि केनचित् ।

उपदेशादयं वादो ज्ञाते द्वैतं न विद्यते ॥

<sup>25</sup> *MāṇḍUp* I.7 (17) b

मायामात्रमिदं द्वैतद्वैतं परमार्थतः ।

<sup>26</sup> *Gauḍapādakārikā* III.4

घटादिषु प्रलीनेषु घटाकाशादयो यथा ।

आकाशे संप्रलीयन्ते तद्वज्जीवा इहात्मनि ॥

<sup>27</sup> *ChāUp* VI.1.4

यथा सोम्यैकेन मृत्पिण्डेन सर्वं मृण्मयं विज्ञातं स्यात् वाचारम्भण विकारो नामधेयं मृत्तिकेत्येव सत्यम् ।

<sup>28</sup> *ÍśaUp* 1 b

तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथाः मा गृधः कस्यस्विद् धनम् ।

<sup>29</sup> *KāthUp* I.3.9

विज्ञानसारथिर्यस्तु मनः प्रग्रहवान्नरः ।

सोऽध्वनः पारमाप्नोति तद्विष्णोः परमं पदम् ॥

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid* II.3.15

यदा सर्वे प्रभिद्यन्ते हृदयस्येह ग्रन्थयः ।

अथ मर्त्योऽमृतो भवत्येतावध्यनुशासनम् ॥

<sup>31</sup> *TaiUp* XI.1

सत्यं वद । धर्मं चर । स्वाध्यायान्मा प्रमदः ।

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