Upanishads

***A Closer Look***

**The Mystery of Brahman, translated by Juan Mascaró**

Once Bhrigu Varuni went to his father Varuna and said: “Father, explain to me the mystery of Brahman.”

Then his father spoke to him of the food of the earth, of the breath of life, of the one who sees, of the one who hears, of the mind that knows, and of the one who speaks. And he further said to him: “Seek to know him from whom all beings have come, by whom they all live, and unto whom these all return. He is Brahman.”

So Bhrigu went and practiced tapas, spiritual prayer. Then he thought that Brahman was the food of the earth: for from earth all beings have come, by food of the earth they all live, and unto the earth they all return.

After this he went again to his father Varuna and said: “Father, explain further to me the mystery of Brahman.” To him his father answered: “Seek to know Brahman by *tapas* , by prayer, because Brahman is prayer.”

So Bhrigu went and practiced *tapas* , spiritual prayer. Then he thought that Brahman was life: for from life all beings have come, by life they all live, and unto life they all return.

After this he went again to his father Varuna and said: “Father, explain further to me the mystery of Brahman.” To him his father answered: “Seek to know Brahman by *tapas* , by prayer, because Brahman is prayer.” So Bhrigu went and practiced *tapas* , spiritual prayer. Then he thought that Brahman was mind: for from mind all beings have come, by mind they all live, and unto mind they all return.

After this he went again to his father Varuna and said: “Father, explain further to me the mystery of Brahman.” To him his father answered: “Seek to know Brahman by *tapas* , by prayer, because Brahman is prayer.”

So Bhrigu went and practiced *tapas* , spiritual prayer. Then he thought that Brahman was reason: for from reason all beings have come, by reason they all live, and unto reason they all return.

He went again to his father, asked the same question, and received the same answer.

So Bhrigu went and practiced *tapas* , spiritual prayer. And then he saw that Brahman is joy: for FROM JOY ALL BEINGS HAVE COME, BY JOY THEY ALL LIVE, AND UNTO JOY THEY ALL RETURN.

This was the vision of Bhrigu Varuni which came from the Highest: and he who sees this vision lives in the Highest.

**The Upanishads: Teaching Philosophy**

Indian philosophers pursued the answers to questions about the meaning of life in texts called the Upanishads, which were written by many different authors from 1000 to 600 b.c.

**To Sit Nearby** Upanishad in the Indian language Sanskrit means “to sit nearby,” in the sense of sitting near a teacher to learn from him. The Upanishads often present complicated subjects, such as the nature of reality, in dialogues between teachers and students. The Upanishads are the final stage in the development of sacred books called the Vedas, which include the Rig Veda. The Upanishads pursue philosophical questions about the meaning of life.



**Brahman, “the Absolute”** The central concept of the Upanishads is the idea of Brahman. This term has been rendered in English as “the one, universal Soul,” and “the Absolute,” but not as “God.” Brahman is neither a god nor an object of worship. As the reality that underlies all appearances, Brahman is the subject of meditation, a kind of prayerlike thought.

**Peeling the Onion** Brahman is a difficult concept to grasp. It can best be defined by stating what it is not. Like peeling the layers of an onion, when everything that is mere appearance has been stripped away, the remaining core will be Brahman. In the Upanishads, this type of description is called “not this, not that.” These sacred books use the “not this, not that” method to arrive at truth.

**Secret and Dangerous Books** In ancient India, scholars secretly studied the Upanishads, because these books focused on Brahman rather than the Hindu gods. Yet this literature influenced many great thinkers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson in nineteenth-century America.

**Activity**

**The Quest for Meaning**

With a group, discuss the different ways modern people seek meaning in their lives. Use these questions to guide your discussion:

* What, if anything, can people in the twenty-first century learn from ancient philosophical texts such as the Upanishads? Explain.
* Do philosophical questions about the meaning of life and the nature of reality have any application to your own life? Why or why not?