

The Concept of the Ecological Self in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad: A Philosophical Exploration

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The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, one of the earliest and most significant Upanishads in Indian philosophical tradition, provides profound insights into the nature of the Self and its intricate relationship with the cosmos. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad presents a vision of the Self that transcends individuality and merges with the cosmic whole. It advocates a holistic worldview where the individual self is not isolated but is intimately connected with all forms of life and the ecosystem. This research article explores the concept of the ecological self within the Upaniṣadic framework, demonstrating how this ancient text lays out a model of interconnectedness that echoes modern ecological concerns. Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad proposes a holistic view of the self as deeply embedded within the natural world, offering an ethical paradigm that challenges the anthropocentric worldview. By linking the human self with nature and recognizing the non-duality between ātman (self) and Brahman (universal consciousness), this Upaniṣad offers timeless philosophical foundations for an ecologically sustainable life. The non-duality provides a philosophical basis for ecological wisdom. This research article also investigates how the Upanishadic worldview inherently supports the concept of the intrinsic value of nature by portraying the universe and its elements as interconnected and divine.

Keywords: Upaniṣad, Ātman, Ecology, Brahman, Nature, Interconnectedness

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the relationship between humanity and nature has been a focal point of discussion in environmental philosophy, particularly through the notion of the ecological self. This concept challenges the Western metaphysical tradition, which often views the self as isolated and separate from the environment. Instead, it promotes an understanding of identity that embraces the interconnectedness of all life forms and ecosystems. Interestingly, this concept of interconnectedness is not exclusive to modern environmental thought. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, one of the foundational texts of the Upanishadic tradition, presents a similar view, suggesting that the self (ātman) is not distinct from the cosmos (Brahman) but rather an integral part of it. This paper will explore the ecological self in light of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, examining how the Upaniṣadic metaphysics of non-duality provides a framework for understanding the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world, offering ethical implications that are relevant in today's ecological crisis.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, we explore the core Upaniṣadic concepts of ātman and Brahman and how they form the foundation for a nondual understanding of the self. Then, we delve into how the Br̥hadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad envisions the dissolution of boundaries between the self and the natural world, fostering a holistic worldview that aligns with contemporary ecological philosophy. After that, the notion of intrinsic value in Upaniṣadic philosophy will be explored. Finally, we address the ethical implications of this worldview and its relevance for fostering sustainable relationships with the environment.

Origin of Environmental Consciousness in Rigveda

According to Vedic writings, the concept of the "environment" should be defined in terms of 'Brahman, the all-pervasive, omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient Supreme Reality. In this view, all entities in the world are divine in nature since they are created by the Divine, exist within the Divine, and eventually dissolve back into the Divine. The R̥ṣis had a deep awareness of how humans and nature are intertwined, highlighting the relationships among all living things. Since ancient times, Indian philosophy has continuously recognized and honored Mother Nature, trees, animals, people, and even inanimate objects as beings that share a common awareness. People live longer and happier lives in harmony with their environment and culture when they coexist in harmony.

Parjanya is a deity of Rigveda related to mother Prithvi and father Ākash. Parjanya is called the god of rain. In modern scientific terms, he is the 'ecological cycle' of nature. The movement of water from the Earth to the sky, through which clouds travel into the sky and then return to the Earth in the form of rain, is a very natural process. An important verse of Rigveda (7.101.3) says that "Ākash is father, his drink-juice is Parjanya. Mother earth accepts this juice. Both are nurtured; progeny are also nurtured—Pitu payah prati grimbhnaati mata ten pita vardhate ten putrah." Water comes from Parjanya. Medicines and plants are derived from water. Parjanya is the self of the world—tasminnaatma jagatastustush sricha. The place of all such deception is Prithvi below, Ākash above. There are beautiful games of beautiful deception, but the root is the exclusive love of Mother Prithvi and Father Ākash. This love of Mother Prithvi and Father Ākash is immortal. The sages of Rigveda are examples of such love deception. In the ancestral sentiment, the earth is alive. It is not lifeless. It is the repository of millions of Vaishnavas. Rising and setting in it is the destiny of every living being. It is the mother. These sages, who view the earth as a mother, are not superstitious. They base their poetry on deep feelings and philosophy. The scientific outlook is their natural instinct. Prithvi is the foundation of their ideology, and Ākash is their principle, scientific, and psychological field.

एकोऽहं बहुस्यामः ।

‘ekoh'ambahuśyāmaḥ’

The Iśopniṣad rightly states,

yastu sarvāṇi bhūtāni ātmanyevānupaśyati sarvabhūteṣu cātmānam tato na vijugupsate ||
yasmin sarvāṇi bhūtāni ātmaivābhūd vijānataḥ| tatra ko mohaḥ kaḥ śoka ekatvamanupaśyataḥ
||

(He who sees the self in all and all in the self has no sense of revulsion because of the vision of nonduality. When all beings have been realized as the "Self", there remains no delusion and no sadness.)

Self-Realization and Ecological Identity

Both philosophies, i.e., Upanishads and Deep Ecology, advocate for self-realization as a means of transcending the ego and recognizing one's identity with the broader whole. In deep ecology, self-realization involves expanding one's sense of self to include the entire ecological community, leading to actions that protect and preserve the environment. In Upanishadic wisdom, self-realization is the recognition that the individual self, i.e., anyone, is identical with the universal reality—Brahman—leading to a sense of compassion and responsibility for all living as well as nonliving beings.

The central themes of Upanishadic Self-Realization include the following:

1. **Unity of Ātman and Brahman:** The realization that the individual self (Ātman) is not separate from universal consciousness (Brahman).
2. **Non-Duality (Advaita):** The belief that all distinctions between the self and the universe, and between different life forms, are illusory. All is one. The process of transcending the ego and realizing one's identity with the entire cosmos.
3. **Interconnectedness of All Life:** The recognition that all beings are manifestations of the same underlying reality and are therefore fundamentally interconnected.
4. **Ethical Living (Dharma):** A way of life that aligns with the cosmic order, promoting harmony and balance in the natural world.

The key principles of deep ecology include the following:

1. **Intrinsic Value of Nature:** All living beings, both human and nonhuman, possess inherent worth, regardless of their usefulness to humans.
2. **Ecocentric Perspective:** The well-being and flourishing of all life forms should be prioritized over anthropocentric interests.
3. **Self-Realization and Ecological Identity:** Deep ecology promotes the idea that personal growth involves identifying with the broader ecological community, dissolving the egoistic self in favor of an expanded self that includes all living beings.
4. **Biospherical Egalitarianism:** There is no hierarchical distinction between species; all life forms have an equal right to live and flourish.

In both cases, self-realization leads to ethical behavior that aligns with the well-being of the whole. In deep ecology, this means living in harmony with nature, whereas in the Upanishads, it means living in accordance with Dharma, i.e., Rta, the cosmic order that ensures balance and harmony in the universe.

This realization has profound ethical implications, as it dissolves the boundaries between self and other, leading to a sense of compassion and responsibility for all beings. Just as Deep Ecology promotes ecological identification, Upanishads encourage individuals to recognize their unity with all forms of life, which fosters a deep respect for the natural world

Ātman and Brahman: The Essence of Nondualism

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad is a central text in the Advaita Vedānta tradition, which emphasizes the nonduality (Advaita) of ātman and Brahman. In this nondualistic philosophy, ātman is the individual soul or self, whereas Brahman is the ultimate reality, the infinite consciousness that pervades the universe. Upaniṣad articulates that there is no essential difference between the individual self and the universal essence. The Mahāvākya “Tat Tvam Asi” (Thou art That) signifies that the individual self is not separate from Brahman but is, in fact, identical.

In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, the self is not an isolated entity. Instead, it is portrayed as an integral part of a cosmic whole. This nondualistic vision challenges the common human tendency to perceive oneself as distinct from the world. The Upaniṣad emphasizes that the

individual's essence—ātman—is inseparable from the universal, omnipresent consciousness—Brahman. Thus, human beings are not alienated from the environment but are fundamentally interconnected with it.

This understanding of ātman and Brahman opens the door to an ecological reading of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. The text encourages individuals to transcend the ego-bound notion of self, recognizing the oneness that exists between the individual and the cosmos. The Upaniṣadic recognition of this fundamental unity invites a profound rethinking of humanity's relationship with nature, fostering an ecological consciousness that is rooted in metaphysical principles.

The Ecological Self: Expanding Identity Beyond the Human

In contemporary ecological philosophy, the concept of the ecological self broadens the definition of selfhood to include the entire living world. Scholars such as Arne Naess, who pioneered the deep ecology movement, have argued that humans must expand their sense of self to include not only other humans but also the ecosystems in which they live. This expanded self-conception fosters an attitude of care and responsibility toward the environment, as harming nature is seen as harming oneself.

A similar notion can be discerned in the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, where the boundaries between the individual and the universe are dissolved. The self, in this context, is not a mere human entity; it encompasses the entire cosmos. Upaniṣadic wisdom emphasizes that Brahman pervades all aspects of existence, whether animate or inanimate—Nainena Kinchanavritam (Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad). The same notion of the self or ultimate reality can be found in Isopaniṣad, as Isavasyamidam Sarvam. Everything is an expression of the same underlying reality, and as such, the self is not limited to the human body or mind but includes all forms of life and the natural environment.

This idea of an expansive, interconnected self can be interpreted as an early articulation of the ecological self. Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad posits that when individuals realize the true nature of the self, they recognize their deep connection with the natural world. The self is not confined to the ego or the individual body but is part of the larger ecological and cosmic system. This nondualistic view encourages a sense of kinship with all forms of life and a recognition of the intrinsic value of the natural world.

Ecological Implications of the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad's Non-Dualism

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad's nondualistic philosophy offers significant ecological implications, as it challenges the dualistic distinction between humanity and nature that has often led to the exploitation of the environment. In the Upaniṣadic view, nature is not separate from humanity but is infused with the same divine essence. This leads to a biocentric or ecocentric perspective, in which the well-being of all forms of life is interconnected with human flourishing.

In this way, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad can be seen as advocating for an ethic of respect and care for the environment. Since the self is not distinct from the natural world, damaging the environment is equivalent to damaging oneself. Upaniṣad's teachings encourage individuals to transcend narrow, self-centered concerns and adopt a more inclusive, holistic view of existence. This perspective has profound ethical implications for how humans interact with the environment.

By recognizing the unity of ātman and Brahman, Upaniṣad suggested that all forms of life are sacred and worthy of respect. In an era of environmental degradation, this Upaniṣadic worldview offers a powerful philosophical basis for ecological ethics. It challenges anthropocentric attitudes that place humans at the center of the universe and advocates for a more harmonious and sustainable relationship with the environment.

The Intrinsic Value of Nature in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

In contemporary discussions on environmental ethics, the question of whether nature possesses intrinsic value—value independent of its usefulness to humans—has become central. Modern environmental movements, such as Deep Ecology, have advocated recognizing the inherent worth of nature, which is also subtly present in ancient philosophical traditions such as the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad.

Nature and Brahman: The Unity of All Existence

At the heart of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad is the concept of Brahman, the ultimate, formless, and all-encompassing reality that pervades the entire universe. In this context, Brahman is not a distant or external deity but rather the very essence of existence itself. All beings, whether animate or inanimate, are manifestations of Brahman. This central teaching of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad dissolves the distinction between humans and nature, suggesting that every element of the natural world is an embodiment of the divine and therefore possesses intrinsic value.

One of the key passages that illustrates this unity is as follows:

‘इयं पृथ्वी सर्वेषां भूतानां मध्वस्यैः’

This earth is the honey of all beings, and all beings are the honey of this earth. The radiant and immortal person in the earth and, in the case of the body, the radiant and immortal person residing in the physical body—they are both one's self (Atman). It is immortal; it is Brahman; it is the whole. (BU 2.5.1)

The preceding passage compares all things and beings to honey, which, to Advaitins and all other Hindus, contains the life-supporting substance *rasa*. *Rasa*, which is believed to be a source of vital energy, can be found, in addition to honey, in semen, tree sap, rainwater, milk, various alcoholic beverages, certain venoms, and the magical substances *amrita* and *soma*. The point of the analogy is to show the value of all beings in this world, for all beings contribute and give life to one another. Like the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita also infers a great deal as to the ecological orientation of Advaita.

Here, Upanishad explains that by understanding the essence of one thing, one can understand the essence of everything. This principle applies to nature as well. Just as the clay in the example symbolizes the underlying reality of Brahman, the natural world also represents various forms of the same divine substance. Every tree, river, mountain, and creature shares the same sacred essence, suggesting that nature's value is intrinsic, rooted in its divine origin, rather than merely instrumental.

Ātman and Nature: The Interconnected Self

The concept of Ātman, the individual self, is equally significant in understanding the Upanishadic view of nature. In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Atman is not merely the personal soul but is ultimately identical to Brahman. In a verse, Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad declares:

“That which is the subtle essence, in it all that exists has its Self. This is true. It is the self. In addition, thou, O Śvetaketu, art it.” (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 6.12)

This identification of the self with the universal spirit dissolves the boundaries between the individual and the environment. When the self (Atman) is recognized as identical with the ultimate reality (Brahman) and when Brahman is understood to permeate all of nature, it follows that all aspects of nature are intrinsically connected to the self. This understanding compels an ethical relationship between humans and the natural world, as harming nature would be akin to harming oneself.

Moreover, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad’s vision of the Self promotes an expanded ecological identity, where human beings are not separate from the natural world but are deeply embedded within it. This realization encourages a form of ecological consciousness that recognizes nature’s inherent value and advocates for its protection and preservation.

Sacralization of Natural Phenomena in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

Another aspect of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad that suggests that the intrinsic value of nature is its sacralization of natural phenomena. In various verses, natural elements such as the sun, the moon, water, and air are not merely physical entities but are imbued with spiritual significance. The famous Mahāvākya of the Chandogya Upanishads, Sarvam Khalvidam Brahman, extends beyond human life to include every aspect of the cosmos.

For example, the sun, in the Upanishadic tradition, is more than just a source of light and heat; it is seen as a manifestation of Brahman and is often associated with the concept of spiritual illumination. Similarly, the elements of earth, air, and water are not just material resources but are part of the cosmic order, sustaining life and maintaining balance in the universe. Their value, therefore, is not dependent on human utility but is rooted in their divine origin and purpose.

By sacralizing natural phenomena, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad implicitly affirms the intrinsic value of nature. This view aligns with ecological philosophies that argue for the inherent worth of nature, independent of its use by human beings. The Upanishadic worldview invites a reverence for the natural world, urging individuals to see it as part of the sacred whole rather than as mere objects for exploitation.

The Role of Meditation and Contemplative Practices

In the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, the realization of the self’s unity with the cosmos is not merely an intellectual understanding; it is something that must be directly experienced through meditation and contemplation. The text emphasizes the importance of meditative practices as a means of transcending the ego and perceiving the deeper truth of nonduality. By engaging in such practices, individuals can come to see themselves as inseparable from the natural world, leading to a transformation of consciousness that is necessary for the development of an ecological self.

Meditation helps practitioners dissolve the illusion of separateness and cultivate a sense of unity with all forms of life. This realization has practical implications for ecological

consciousness, as it fosters an attitude of care and responsibility toward the environment. The Upaniṣadic tradition thus offers practical tools for cultivating an ecological self that is in harmony with nature.

(yajnavalkya and maitreyi dialog)

Ethical and practical implications for contemporary environmentalism

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad provides a powerful ethical foundation for contemporary environmentalism by offering a nondualistic view of the self and the cosmos. In recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings, the text encourages a way of life that is in balance with nature. This is particularly relevant in the modern world, where environmental degradation and climate change pose serious threats to the planet's ecosystems.

By embracing the Upaniṣadic vision of the self as inseparable from the natural world, individuals can develop a deeper sense of responsibility for the environment. The Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad calls for a radical rethinking of human-nature relationships, urging us to move away from exploitative practices and toward a more sustainable and ethical way of life.

Relevance of Upaniṣadic Wisdom in the Context of the Modern Environmental Crisis

In the contemporary era, human-driven activities such as deforestation, pollution, climate change, and resource exploitation have led to widespread environmental degradation. This ecological crisis has prompted a global call for sustainable development and a rethinking of humanity's relationship with nature. The Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad offers valuable insights into how ancient wisdom can address modern environmental challenges.

By promoting the idea of the ecological self, Upaniṣadic teachings provide a framework for fostering deeper environmental consciousness. This consciousness is based on the recognition that harming nature is equivalent to harming oneself, since all beings are interconnected within the same cosmic reality. The Upaniṣadic view of the self encourages individuals to adopt a lifestyle that minimizes harm to the environment and seeks to maintain the balance of ecosystems.

Moreover, the ethical principles derived from the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad are closely aligned with the goals of contemporary environmental movements, such as sustainability, conservation, and respect for biodiversity. The text's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life forms offers a moral imperative to protect not only human interests but also the well-being of all living creatures. This holistic approach to ethics challenges the exploitative attitudes that have contributed to ecological destruction and encourages a more compassionate and responsible approach to environmental stewardship.

Ecological Dharma: A Path Forward

The teachings of the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad can be seen as providing the philosophical foundations for what could be called an ecological dharma—a way of living that is in harmony with the natural world. In the Upaniṣadic tradition, dharma refers to the cosmic law or order that governs the universe. When applied to the ecological self, dharma signifies an ethical responsibility to protect and preserve the environment, as this is necessary for maintaining the balance of the cosmos.

This ecological dharma aligns with the principle of ahimsa (nonviolence), a core tenet of Indian philosophy that advocates minimizing harm to all living beings. By recognizing the self's unity

with the natural world, Upaniṣadic teachings call for a life of nonviolence toward nature. Just as one would avoid harming another person, so too should one avoid causing harm to the environment. This principle has practical implications for how humans engage with nature, promoting practices such as sustainable agriculture, conservation, and the protection of natural resources.

In addition, the concept of karma (the law of cause and effect) also plays a crucial role in understanding the ecological implications of the Upaniṣadic worldview. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad teaches that every action has consequences, and this applies not only to human interactions but also to interactions with the environment. Actions that damage the environment—such as pollution or deforestation—will inevitably result in negative consequences, not only for future generations but also for individuals' spiritual and physical well-being. Thus, Upaniṣad encourages individuals to act in ways that are in harmony with the natural world, as this will lead to positive outcomes for both humanity and the planet.

The Role of Spiritual Practices in Fostering Ecological Consciousness

In addition to its philosophical and ethical teachings, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad highlights the importance of spiritual practices in cultivating an ecological consciousness. Through meditation, contemplation, and self-reflection, individuals can transcend the ego and experience the unity of all life. These practices help to dissolve the illusion of separateness and foster a direct experience of the interconnectedness between the self and the natural world.

By engaging in these spiritual practices, individuals can develop a deeper sense of empathy and compassion for all living beings. This expanded awareness leads to a greater sense of responsibility for the environment and a commitment to living in harmony with nature. The Upaniṣadic tradition thus offers practical tools for fostering an ecological self that is grounded in both spiritual insight and ethical action.

Ethical Implications: Reverence for Life and Environmental Responsibility

The recognition of the intrinsic value of nature in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad has significant ethical implications. If nature is seen as an expression of Brahman and if Atman is understood to be interconnected with all living and nonliving entities, then an ethic of environmental responsibility naturally arises. Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad suggested that ethical living, or dharma, is not limited to human relationships but extends to the entire cosmos.

Moreover, the Upanishadic principle of nonduality (Advaita) reinforces the ethical imperative to protect and preserve nature. Since the distinctions between the self and the world, and between humans and nature, are ultimately illusory, the exploitation of nature for personal gain is not only unethical but also a misunderstanding of the true nature of reality.

The Upanishadic view of nature as possessing intrinsic value has profound relevance in contemporary environmental discourse. In a world facing unprecedented ecological challenges—climate change, deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss—the wisdom of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad offers a spiritual and philosophical foundation for environmental ethics.

Many modern environmental movements, such as Deep Ecology, resonate with the Upanishadic view by advocating for the inherent worth of all life forms and rejecting anthropocentrism. The recognition that nature has intrinsic value, independent of human needs

and desires, is crucial for developing sustainable and ethical approaches to environmental stewardship.

As contemporary societies grapple with the ecological crisis, the wisdom of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* offers valuable insights into how humans can develop a more harmonious relationship with the environment. By recognizing the inherent worth of nature and understanding our deep connection to the cosmos, we can cultivate a more sustainable and ethical approach to living in the world.

2. Conclusion: Timeless Relevance of the Ecological Self

The concept of the ecological self, as articulated in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, offers a profound and transformative way of understanding human identity and its relationship with the natural world. By recognizing the nonduality between *ātman* and *Brahman*, *Upaniṣad* teaches that the self is not an isolated entity but is deeply interconnected with all forms of life. This holistic view of the self challenges anthropocentric and exploitative attitudes toward the environment, instead promoting a worldview that values the intrinsic worth of nature and encourages a life of ecological balance and harmony. In today's world, where environmental degradation threatens the well-being of all life forms, the teachings of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* are more relevant than ever. The text provides a philosophical and ethical framework that encourages individuals to expand their sense of self to include the entire cosmos, fostering a sense of kinship with nature. This expanded self-conception, coupled with the principles of nonviolence and ecological dharma, offers a powerful foundation for addressing the ecological challenges of the modern era.

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* reminds us that our actions toward the environment are not separate from our spiritual lives. By recognizing the unity of all beings and acting in ways that preserve the balance of nature, we can contribute to the well-being of the planet while also advancing our own spiritual growth. In this way, *Upaniṣad* offers a timeless source of wisdom for those seeking to live in harmony with the natural world and promote a more sustainable and compassionate future. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* presents a profound and holistic understanding of the self, one that is inseparable from the cosmos and deeply interconnected with the natural world. Its vision of the *ātman* as identical with that of *Brahman* challenges dualistic conceptions of the self, instead offering a nondualistic framework that resonates with the modern notion of the ecological self. This *Upaniṣadic* teaching provides a timeless philosophical foundation for ecological ethics, emphasizing the need for humans to recognize their deep connection with nature and to live in harmony with the environment.

This worldview has far-reaching ethical implications. By dissolving the artificial boundaries between the self and nature, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* promoted a shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. The text suggests that humans are not masters or exploiters of nature but rather participants in an intricate web of life. When individuals recognize that their own essence is inseparable from broader ecological systems, they are more likely to adopt behaviors that nurture and protect the environment. The *Upaniṣad* encourages a life of balance, where human actions are aligned with the natural world rather than being in opposition to it.

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