

# Upanishadic Vision in T. S. Eliot's Poems and Plays

✍️ Damaru Chandra Bhatta\*

## Abstract

*The objective of this paper is to explore how T. S. Eliot's writings reflect the vision of the Upanishads. This paper examines the extent to which his writings are similar to the philosophy of the Upanishads. His major poems and plays recall the ideas of the non-dualistic or monistic Vedic vision of the Upanishads. So far as one has a dualistic-bent of mind, he cannot be free from the cycle of death and rebirth, or pain and pleasure. Peace and bliss comes from the meditation of the Self within the heart. This article traces Eliot's personal quest for understanding the meaning of human existence and the spiritual essence of life.*

**Key Words:** Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, Buddhism, Christianity, spiritualism, non-dualism, dualism

## Introduction

T. S. Eliot is an American born British essayist, publisher, playwright, literary and social critic, and "one of the twentieth century's major poets." "Harry Oldmeadow is an Australian author, editor and educator whose works focus on Eastern religion and philosophy" ("Harry Oldmeadow"). He critically evaluates, in his famous book, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions*, Eliot's interest in the Eastern philosophy:

In 1911 T. S. Eliot embarked on three years of intensive postgraduate study at Harvard of Sanskrit, Pali, Indian philosophy (particularly logic, ethics and metaphysics, and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras), and the religious thought of China and Japan. This three-year immersion in Eastern philosophy, metaphysics and philosophy at Harvard left a lasting mark, both on his own spiritual development and on his poetic vision and method. Although Eliot summed up the fruit of his Ideological studies as "enlightened mystification" the impact was sufficiently serious for him to consider, at the time of composing "The Wasteland," becoming a Buddhist, before committing himself to Anglo-Catholicism. On the evident of his own testimony it can be argued that Eliot's eventual religious affiliation grew out of his early Indian studies which helped him to escape the intellectual prejudices of his own milieu-a not unfamiliar pattern of spiritual growth. (30)

Highlighting the remarkable treatment of Eliot's Oriental references, which has distinguished his writings in the canon of English literature, Oldmeadow writes:

Eastern themes, motifs and allusions are to be found throughout Eliot's work but particularly in his two poetic masterpieces, "The Wasteland" and *Four Quartets*. The Buddha's "fire Sermon," the eighth chapter of the Gita, and several Upanishads figure prominently in these works. Critics have argued about the precise meaning and effectiveness of Eliot's use of Eastern imagery and scriptural allusions but there is little doubt that they contribute significantly to a sharply distinctive method and poetic vision. Eliot himself explicitly acknowledged his poetic debt to "Indian thought and sensibility." (30)

Similarly, exploring the different sources of Eliot's wide intellectual knowledge of significant spiritual philosophies of the world, Oldmeadow writes:

The impact of Buddhism is most evident in *Four Quartets* which is pervaded by the premier doctrines of impermanence and suffering, whilst Eliot's treatment of the central theme of time and eternity bears a strong Eastern inflection. We might also note that Eliot's practice of synthesizing themes from Greek, Hindu and Buddhist as well as Christian sources testifies to his belief in a mystical experience which is of neither East nor West and which transcends religious forms—a characteristically thought not exclusively Eastern notion. But Eliot was no "New Age" eclectic: his well-known insistence on the intimate relationship of culture and religion, and on the necessity of the particularities of tradition precluded any sentimental notion of a "distillation" of the "essence" of different religions such as might lead to a new "universal" religion. He also disapproved of those Western appropriations of Eastern religion which ignored or jettisoned "hagiology, rites and customs. (30-31)

Eliot's poems and plays should be interpreted from the lens of the Upanishads, because Eliot's spiritual ideas are similar to the ones of the Upanishads. Though there are references to the Buddhist and Christian spiritual thoughts, they are also the Upanishadic visions because the Upanishad is the mother or source of them all.

### **The Upanishad as the Source of all Spiritual Philosophies**

The Upanishad is the source of all spiritual philosophies—Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. Buddha was a Hindu before he became a buddha (an enlightened one). He was brought up in the Hindu culture and Vedic philosophy. "The Vedanta philosophy is the foundation of Buddhism and everything else in India; but what we call the Advaita philosophy of the modern school has a great many conclusions of the Buddhists (Vivekananda 59)." Buddhism and Hinduism share a lot of concepts [such as] Karma, Rebirth, Samsara, Nirvana, Samadhi, the symbol of wheel standing for time or birth and death, and the symbol of lotus standing for consciousness and so on. The question is, did Buddhism arise from a Vedic milieu, did it influence Vedic philosophy, or was it a reciprocal relationship? In fact, it's very easy to read into Buddhism a simplified, secularized apophatic approach to Vedic philosophy" (Barzell). In my view, the Buddhist philosophy was influenced by the Vedic philosophy including the Upanishads. Christianity came after Buddhism. The Christian philosophy is influenced by both Hindu and Buddhist ones because some religious and spiritual concepts are similar between them. Louis Jacolliot suggests Indian influences on Jesus (and Christianity) although he does not claim travels by Jesus to India. On the other hand, Abbot George Burke (Swami Nirmalananda Giri) exposes that the base of Original Christianity is Sanatana Dharma what we call today Hinduism and that Jesus had been to India from where he got the spiritual insight of the Sanatana Dharma:

Original Christianity is the basic, classical teachings of Sanatana Dharma, the Eternal Dharma, which were taught by Jesus, who was a missionary to the West of the spiritual vision of India, and the empowering and transforming rituals instituted by Jesus and known as Sacraments that were meant to accomplish outside India what the traditional samskaras and spiritual initiations (diksha) accomplished for those living in India. It was the earliest form of Vedanta for the West.

He further adds the remarks of Saint Augustine that Christianity is not a new religion. It is rooted to the ancient religion:

Saint Augustine wrote in the fourth century: "The identical thing that we now call the Christian religion existed among the ancients and has not been lacking from the beginnings of the human race until the coming of Christ in the flesh, from which moment on the true religion, which already existed, began to be called 'Christian'."

### **The Sources of Eliot's Literature**

As said earlier, Eliot's sources of his literature are the Oriental, Christian, Buddhist and Classical philosophies. The Western scholars have interpreted Eliot's works, especially from the viewpoint of the Christian and Classical philosophy. But I notice a lot of echoes of the ancient Hindu philosophy in his works. Only a few Western critics are able to notice the closely parallel ideas running both in the ancient Hindu philosophy and his works. Even then, they have not given emphasis on the similarities between the ancient Oriental vision and Eliot's vision in his writings. They just label such ideas as "exoticism." There are many allusions and references to the Bhagavad-Gita, the Upanishads and the Buddhist philosophy in Eliot's writings. "The Bhagavad-Gita . . . is the most beautiful philosophical song existing in any known tongue" (Oppenheimer).

Not only are Eliot's poetry and drama in harmony with his critical standards, but they also show his understanding and skillful use of the works of earlier authors in the presentation of his ideas. Being profound in the universal theme, his works are classics. They deserve studying from the viewpoint of humanity, morality and spirituality. Regarding spirituality, they can be studied from different viewpoints: Christian, Classical, Hindu and Buddhist.

There are eleven principal Upanishads whose commentaries were given by Adi Shankaracharya: Isavasya, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chhandogya, Brihadaranyaka, and Shvetashwatara. The study of the Upanishads helps to understand Eliot and his ideas of which importance to human life is paramount in order to end the ills of life. As said earlier, his spiritual ideas are much similar to the ideas of the Upanishads such as Brihadaranyaka, Kena, Katha, Chhandogya, Taittiriya, Mundaka, Mandukya, Maitri and Pingala.

### **Eliot's Upanishad-oriented Vision and its Importance**

"Eliot strives to cultivate the essence of Reality existing within the Self of humankind, the essence that might ultimately bring about an ecstatic illumination of the One, the ground of all Being" (Williams). In this connection, McCarthy reveals:

The general problem which determines the deeper design of Eliot's poetical reflections- the problem of man's relationship to both time and eternity within the context of the fact of human bondage and the possibility of human freedom- is absolutely universal and has been given expression in the philosophical and religious traditions of both the East and the West. (54-55). The standard biographical reading of T. S. Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism is that he rejected the liberal theology of his Unitarian upbringing to embrace a more traditional notion of evil: The "doctrine of Original Sin [utterly repudiated by Unitarianism] is at the heart of T. S. Eliot' Anglo-catholic faith. Unitarians regarded sin as a failing in ethical behavior. And yet,

Baudelaire translates sin into a psychological state that is intrinsic to moral as well as spiritual apathy" (Freer and Bell 82-83). But the Hindus believe that human beings are not sinners. Rather they think they themselves are God. With regard to this, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad declares that "I am Brahman"-aham bramaasmi (1:4:10). Making a correct judgment, Freer and Bell opine that "Eliot left his parents' Unitarianism, converted into Anglo-Catholicism but finally realized that his parents' belief on Unitarianism was correct "after extensive study of Eastern philosophical and religious system at Harvard" (3).

Roz Kaveney, a British writer, critic, poet and activist, writes that Eliot's poetry and drama are related to his personal life-his guilt, desire, rebellion, and personal, marital or familial unhappiness. He spends most of his life turning himself into a glum, austere person. He suffers imposter syndrome-the feeling that he cannot really be as gifted as people tell him he is, and as a mixture of self-worth and vanity sometimes tells him he is-as most talented people suffer all their lives (Kaveney, *The Guardian*). However, he does not tell them all in his writings. Rather, he impersonalizes or depersonalizes them by applying his theory of impersonalisation mentioned in his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." This theory of impersonalisation or depersonalization is similar to the concept of the Brihadaranyaka and Shvetashvatara Upanishads that Brahman can be realized only by the extinction of one's ego or self-identification of body.

Religion also plays a great role in shaping one's personality and thinking. In this regard, Christianity is not much helpful because it says that all the human beings are miserable sinners from their birth. The concept of the "Original Sin" leads them to depression. Eliot rejected the concept of the Original Sin of Christianity after he learnt through the Upanishads of the Eastern philosophy that all the human beings of the world are the offspring of the Immortal (an idea of Svetashvatara Upanishad 2.5), and so they cannot be sinners by birth. This context can be related to Kaveney's remarks that Eliot's poetry "was aggressively about 'birth and copulation and death' . . . perhaps a sudden education in the flesh, and its disadvantages" (*The Guardian*).

Eliot's poetry and drama can be analyzed from the concepts of the Upanishads by relating them to the humanitarian, moral and spiritual values of life. The words of the Upanishads are supposed to be divine as heard by the ancient Hindu seers, who later uttered them as part of their illumined experience, which is related to the personal inner reality of feelings and emotions. They can be applied as a spiritual treatment for the worldly and mental disease of lust, anger, avarice, attachment, pride, miserliness, jealousy, infatuation, and enmity. The Upanishadic thoughts, which find their expressions in Eliot's poems and plays, are best to be learnt and practiced earlier in life. As Eliot expressed in his swan-song, *The Elder Statesman*, a play of "human and divine love" (Smith), "The sense of well being! It's often with us when we are young, but then it's not noticed; and by the time one has grown to consciousness it comes less often" (qtd. in Liebowitz). Hence, the expressions carrying the Upanishadic themes or values can be best analyzed in context of the moral and spiritual death of the modern men in the West where there are "hollow men." With the concept of the conflict between the worldly and spiritual lives of every modern man of the West and its possible resolution in terms of the Hindu philosophy, Eliot's writings can be explored. The concepts of the Upanishads such as appearance (Maya or illusion) and reality (truth, essence), meditation, prayer, renunciation, soul, Brahman, life,

death, time, immortality, eternity, grace, attachment, indifference, detachment, dispassion, ephemerality, charity, self-control, compassion, impermanence, suffering, hopelessness, sadness, craving and Maya, the turning wheel, the still point, peace, happiness, incarnation can be taken into account. The key terms such as the yoga of knowledge, yoga of action, yoga of bhakti, yoga of meditation, humanity, morality, spirituality, mysticism and the philosophy can be used to relate to the Hindu ontology, epistemology and metaphysics. The Upanishadic parameters, which are not found in Christianity, can be focused on while interpreting Eliot's works. Such parameters are: a sense of doubleness, i.e., the difference and relationship between the two birds (the ignorant soul or person, and the knowledgeable soul or person; the individual soul and the universal Self) living in the same tree (the body), death and afterlife (reincarnation), bondage and liberation; the doctrine of karma (literally action); the karma performed without expecting the result; the importance of the "Fire (of Nachiketa)" among the five elements; universal single consciousness; and the enquiry over the world, the cosmos and oneself. Bhatta writes that moksha, like a lump of salt dissolving into water, is a unique concept of the Oriental philosophies. There is no concept of the moksha in the Occidental philosophy. There is only the discussion of the individual souls living in the heaven or the hell after death (175).

The orthodox Occidental philosophy is mainly dualistic-it asserts the rule of both Demon and God whereas the Hindu philosophy is mainly non-dualistic, which asserts: "tat tvam asi"- "That are thou" (Chhandogya Upanishad 6:8:7), that we finally go to that source of power from which we had come and that the journey of life ends there where it had started. Eliot presents the same non-dualistic philosophy in his poem "East Cocker": "In my beginning is my end. In my end is my beginning" (121,129). Eliot's the same quotation confirms his belief in the circular motion of time. Time is linear in the Western sense whereas it is circular, in the Eastern sense, causing birth, death and rebirth as per human actions (Center for Global Education).

In the view of (bhakti schools of) Vedanta, man of any religion is a part of Brahman; it does not treat any Indian or foreigner as the other. This is its unique or distinctive merit in comparison to the other philosophies (Acharya). Eliot's writings can be interpreted more preferably in the line of the non-dualistic viewpoint of the Eastern philosophy. The Eastern philosophy is characteristically non-dualistic whereas the Western one, dualistic. Explaining the dualistic Christian philosophy, Moody writes:

Christian thought, being profoundly dualistic, is directed towards transcendence. It thinks of God as outside and above the earth, even while its theologians struggle to correct the impossible logic of excluding the Whole from the part. It separates the soul from the body, and would transport it from earthly life to a realm of eternal being. It would put off mortality and become immortal. And it means this literally, for it speaks of an ultimate reunion of the individual soul with its risen and glorified body. Moreover, traditionally, Christian thought has tended to move rather swiftly from this 'fallen' vale of tears to the prospect of eternal salvation.

The conviction of Eliot as written in the concluding line of his "Little Gidding," the last poem of his masterpiece The Four Quartets, is that "the fire and the rose are one [and the same]," which is similar to the non-dualistic concept of the Chhandogya Upanishad that "All this is Brahman" (3:14:1). So, the Katha Upanishad (2:1:10) warns the human being not to be dual-minded: What indeed is here, is there; what is there, is here likewise. He who sees [Brahman] as though there is difference here, goes from death to death [again and again until he realizes that everything is (a form of) Brahman]. (Gambhirananda, vol.1 190).

If he seeks differences in all, as stated in the Katha Upanishad (1.1.6), "Like corn the mortal ripens and fall and like corn is born again. This analogy illustrates the cycle of re-birth and death" (Muller 10). Therefore, the cause of repeated birth and death is the sense of duality, which seeks differences, isolations, segregations and inequality everywhere among everyone and among everything. Actually, from the viewpoint of non-duality, no one and nothing is different from Brahman. Everyone or everything is the manifestation of the same Ultimate Reality / Essence (i.e. Brahman).

### Conclusion

Eliot's writings echo the spiritually philosophical vision of the Upanishads. Though the Westerners refuse that his main intention was not to assimilate the Vedic teachings of the Upanishads, yet the dominant influence of the Oriental philosophy on his major poems and plays cannot be refuted. That he was a student of the Eastern philosophy at Harvard is as clear as the day. Truth cannot be hidden. According to the Mundaka Upanishad (3:1:6), truth alone wins, and not untruth" (Gambhirananda, vol. 2, 146). The Upanishadic themes such as non-dualism or monism, asceticism, renunciation, cosmic Time, eternity, the theory of Karma / the Wheel (birth-death-rebirth), ephemerality, craving and Maya, impermanence and suffering, charity, compassion, self-control, and the belief in the Self ("the Still Point") as a source of divine joy are found in his poems and plays.

### Works Cited

- Barzell, R. "Buddhism Beta." *Stack Exchange*, posted on 21 March 2015 at 7:13, [buddhism.stackexchange.com/questions/8323/did-the-buddha-ever-mention-the-upanishads-or-the-vedas](http://buddhism.stackexchange.com/questions/8323/did-the-buddha-ever-mention-the-upanishads-or-the-vedas). Accessed 18 Feb. 2017.
- Bhatta, Ram Chandra. *Upanishad Maa Ke Chha? [What is in the Upanishad?]*. Kathmandu, Dikura Publication, 2072 B.S.
- "Brihadaranyaka Upanishad." *The Principal Upanishads*, edited and translated by Radhakrishnan, NOIDA, Harper Collins Publishers, 2012.
- Burke, Abbot George (Swami Nirmalananda Giri). "What are Original Christianity and Yoga?" *Original Christianity and Yoga*, [ocoy.org/](http://ocoy.org/). Accessed 4 August 2017.
- "Chhandogya Upanishad." *The Principal Upanishads*, edited and translated by Radhakrishnan, NOIDA, Harper Collins Publishers, 2012.
- Center for Global Education*. "Indian Influences on Western Culture." *Asia Society*, [www.asiasociety.org/education/indian-influences-western-literature](http://www.asiasociety.org/education/indian-influences-western-literature). Accessed 4 Feb. 2017.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*. USA, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1967.
- Freer, Scott and Michael Bell, editors. *Religion and Myth in T. S. Eliot's Poetry*. UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, pp. 77-88.
- Gambhirananda, Swami. *Eight Upanishads*. Vol.1 & 2, with the Commentary of Shankaracharya, Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, 2014.

"Harry Oldmeadow." *Wikipedia*, The Free Encyclopedia, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry\\_Oldmeadow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Oldmeadow). Accessed 18 Sept. 2017.

Jaccoliot, L. "La Bible dans l'Inde." *Librairie Internationale*, Paris digitized by Google Books.

Kaveney, Roz. "T. Eliot: Guilt, Desire and Rebellion at Respectability." *The Guardian*, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/07/ts-eliot-guilt-desire-rebellion-respectability](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/07/ts-eliot-guilt-desire-rebellion-respectability). Accessed 9 Sept. 2017.

Liebowitz. "Anti-Ageing Secrets." Liebowitz Longevity Medicine, [www.liebowitzlongevity.com/anti-ageing-secrets](http://www.liebowitzlongevity.com/anti-ageing-secrets). Accessed 4 Feb. 2017.

McCarthy, Harold E. "T. S. Eliot and Buddhism." *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 2, no. 1, University of Hawaii Press, April 1952, pp. 31-55. Accessed 5 March 2016.

Moody, A. David. *Tracing T. S. Eliot's Spiritual Spirit: Essays on his Poetry and Thought*. New York, CUP, 1996. PDF File.

Muller, F. Max. *Upanishads: The Holy Spirit of Vedas*. Delhi, VIJAYA GOEL, 2014.

Oppenheimer, Robert. *The Great Upanishad's post in timeline photos*. 26 June 2017 at 2:52 am.

Sharma, Acharya Shreeram. "Vedanta Darshan: Ek Samkshipta Parichaya" ["Vedant Philosophy: A Succinct Introduction"]. *The Vedic Philosophy (Rishichintan)*, posted by Chandan, [www.cpdarshi.wordpress.com/2012/09/08/jbf+t-bz{s-PS-;lf/f](http://www.cpdarshi.wordpress.com/2012/09/08/jbf+t-bz{s-PS-;lf/f). Accessed 4 Feb. 2017.

"Shvetshvatara Upanishad." *The Principal Upanishads*, edited and translated by Radhakrishnan, NOIDA, Harper Collins Publishers, 2012.

Smith, Carol H. *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice: From Sweeney Agonistes to The Elder Statesman*, [krainaksiazek.pl/TS-Eliots-Dramatic-Theory-and-Practice-From-Sweeney-Agonistes-to-the-Elder-Statesman,9780691622910.html](http://krainaksiazek.pl/TS-Eliots-Dramatic-Theory-and-Practice-From-Sweeney-Agonistes-to-the-Elder-Statesman,9780691622910.html). Accessed 5 Feb. 2017.

Vivekananda, Swami. *Buddha and His Message*. Kolkata, Advaita Ashram, 2012.

Williams, Stephen. *Unity in Diversity: T. S. Eliot and Religious Liberalism*. 1st edition, Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2015, [www.createpace.com/5629935](http://www.createpace.com/5629935). Accessed 20 July 2017.

१. श्रुण्वन्ति विश्वे अमत स्य पत्राः । (श्वेताश्वतर उपनिषद् २। ५)

shrinvanti vishve amritasya putraah. (Shevetashvatara Upanishad 2:5)

२. यदेवेह तदमुत्र यदमुत्र तदन्विह ।

mृत्योः स मृत्युम् आप्नोति (गच्छति) य इह नानेव पश्यति । (कठ उपनिषद् २। १। १०/११)

yadeveha tadamutra yadamutra tadanviha

mrityoh sa mrityum aapnoti (gachchhati) ya iha naaneva pashyati. (Katha Upanishad 2:1:10-11)

३. अनुपश्य यथा पूर्वे प्रतिपश्य तथापरे ।

सस्यमिव मर्त्यः पच्यते सस्यमिवाजायते पुनः ॥ (कठ उपनिषद् १। १। ६)

anupshya ythaa poorve pratipashya tathaapare

sasyamiva martyah pachyate sasyamivaajaayate punah. (Katha Upanishad 1:1:6)

४. सत्यमेव जयते नानृतम् । (मुण्डक उपनिषद् ३। १। ६)

satyameva jayate naanritam. (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:6)

