

The Science of Upanishads - Part 18: The Prashna Upanishad

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The *Prashna Upanishad* is an ancient Sanskrit text, embedded inside Atharva Veda, ascribed to Pippalada sakha of Vedic scholars. It is a Mukhya Upanishad, and is listed as number 4 in the Muktika canon of 108 Upanishads of Hinduism. “Prashna” in Sanskrit means “Question”, so the essence of “Prashna Upanishad” is “Ask a Question and Receive a Divine Answer”. It is a series philosophical poems presented as questions (prashna) inquired by various Hindu sages (Rishis) and answered by Sage Pippalada. The Prashna Upanishad consists of six main questions, asked by six seekers of truth and answered by sage Pippalapada. The questions cover a wide range of subjects concerning the origin of creation, superiority of breath, the supporting and illuminating powers of manifest creation, the source of life for the physical body, the paths of breath in the body, the nature of dream and deep sleep states, the benefits of chanting the sacred mantra Aum and the significance of the sixteen tattvas or realities of Nature. From the Upanishad, we learn that an enlightened master would not reveal the secrets of higher knowledge unless he was satisfied that the recipients were qualified and disciplined. Pippalapada, the son of Dadhichi, was a historic person, considered a teacher of the Atharva Veda and founder of an ancient school of thought. He probably lived a few centuries or decades before Buddha and some of his disciples might be contemporaries of Buddha. His name suggests that he had some connection with the Pipal tree, or with its fruit which he was said to be fond of, or with a branch of ascetics who meditated traditionally under the tree because of its miraculous powers. It is a known fact that Buddha got enlightenment under a pipal tree. Pippalapada used to insist that his disciples stayed with him for a year before he would answer them any questions they asked.

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