The term “upa (near) -ni (down) -shada-[sit]” means “to sit by the side”. The knowledge that was imparted by the teacher by keeping the student closely by his side, is dealt with in the Upanishads. This implies that the subject that is taught is of the nature of a secret personal advice that could be imparted only to the “eligible” [adhikaari], who is conditioned to absorb the teaching! It also means, “that knowledge that makes one reach near Brahman” similar to the term “upanayana” [leading to the Paramaatman]. The Upanishads give the spiritual vision and philosophical arguments and contain the ultimate message and purpose of the Vedas. They are known as “vedanta”. The term “anta” means “end”. Upanishads are the “end” of the Vedas in two senses: 1. Physical location of the Upanishads in the scriptures - first Samhita, then Braahmana, followed by Aaranyakas, at the concluding portion of which is the upanishads; 2. The ultimate goal or aim of the Vedas is contained in the Upanishads beyond which there is nothing more to go further!

Upanishads expound the direct method of realization through jnaana maarga [the path of knowledge], the abhedha [non-duality] of the Supreme Being and the Jiva. Even though Upanishads contain information about rituals [yajas], worship of deities etc., the focus is on the philosophical analysis and deals with a state of free mind with all its attachments [bondage] removed. The karma kaanda portion of the scriptures conditions the mind to develop an internal discipline at the summit of which experience, analysis of the non-duality of the Jiva [soul] and Brahman becomes clearer! At this stage [of removal from all physical bondage], one gets initiated to the “mahaa vaakhyaas” [the great sayings] ! If one meditates intensely on these, scholars say, that the non-duality could be actually experienced. Four mahaa vaakhyaas are considered most important and are contained in four upanishads. They are:

1. prajnaanam brahma [प्रज्ञानम् ब्रह्म] - the actual experience alone is Brahman - Aitareya Upanishad : Rig Veda.

2. aham brhamaasmi [अहं ब्रह्मास्मि] - I am Brahman - Brihadaaranyaka Upanishad: Sukla Yajur Veda. The fourth chapter of Taittiriya Upanishad of Krishna Yajur Veda has a slightly different mahaa vaakhya - ahamasmi brahmaahamasmii [अहं अभ्यासी ब्राह्माः]

3. tat tvam asi [तत् त्वं अस्ति] - that you are - Chaandogya Upanishad: Saama Veda.


As one would understand, these are instructions which can be given only to a spiritual aspirant who is highly qualified [adhikaari] to receive them, and so are treated like a rahasya [secret]!
There are several Upanishads (over two hundreds!) and Sri Adi Sankara chose to write commentaries (bhashya) upon ten of them, known as dasopanishads. Sri Ramanuja and Sri Madhva also wrote commentaries on the same ten Upanishads. Whereas Adi Sankara highlighted the non-dual (advaita) philosophy propounded in them, Sri Ramanuja emphasised visishta-advaita (qualified non-dual) and Sri Madhva, the dvaita (dual) philosophies. The ten Upanishads are given in the sloka:

ईश्वरेश्वरस्मिनः पुण्डरीकमण्डलं तैत्तिरीयः

They are Isa, kena, kathaa, praSaNa, maNdUkya, taittiriya, aitareeya, chaandogya and brahadaaranyakya Upanishads. Adi Sankara’s commentary is written in the same order as above.

1. Isaavaasya (इसावास्य) or Isa Upanishad

It is placed at the end of Sukla Yajur Veda’s Samhita portion. It begins with the words "Isaa vaasyam" and hence the name. The Upanishad begins by saying that Iswara pervades the whole cosmic makeup and one should attain the state of realization of this "paramaatma tattva" by dedicating one’s fruit of all karmas to That Divinity alone!

ईश्वरेश्वरस्मि अविकृतं जगत्य जगत्यमलयां

2. Kenaopanishad केनोपाणिषदं

This Upanishad starts with the word "kena" and so the name. It is also called talavakaara upanishad since it appears in the talavakaara brahmaNa of the Jaimini saakha of Saama veda. This describes how the Mother Herself enlightened Indra with divine wisdom to understand the nature of paramaatman. It is glorified with a saying “search for whatever is lost in Kena”! The Upanishad starts with a set of questions, “Willed by whom does the directed mind go towards its object? Being directed by whom does the vital force that precedes all, proceed (towards its duty)? By whom is this speech willed that people utter? Who is the effulgent being who directs the eyes and the ears?” . The Upanishad proceeds to declare that "It (Brahman) is known to him to whom It is unknown; he does not know to whom It is known. It is unknown to those who know well, and known to those who do not know" - an intense and minute analysis!

3. Kathopanishad कथोपाणिषदं

This Upanishad occurs in the “kathaka Saakha" of Krishana Yajur Veda. It contains the dialog between the Lord of Death and Nachiketas, a young boy who demanded to know the answer for the question, “what happens to the soul after death?” Although it begins with a story, it expounds a great truth that the Atma is different from the body and all afflictions of the body (like anger, hatred, likes, passion, etc.) and so one should train the mind to view the body as an external object to Atman.

4-6 Prasna प्रस्न Mundaka मुन्दक and Maandukya मान्दुक्य Upanishads

These three belong to Atharva Veda. Prasnoopanishad deals with the analysis of six questions (praSaNa means question) and they are: 1. How creation began? 2. Devas are
whom? 3. How body and life are connected? 
4. What are three states - wakefulness, dream and deep sleep? 5. What is the benefit of worshipping the Pranava? 6. What is the relation between Purusha and Jiva?

Mundaka Upanishad is believed to be followed by Sannyasins with detached disposition of the phenomenal world. The term mundaka means “fully shaven-head” or “tonsure”. The upanishad deals with ‘akshara brahman’ which may mean either as the one which is free from dissolution (decay) or as “syllable”. The imagery of the Jivaatma and Paramaatma as two birds perched on the tree of sareera (body) where the Jiva bird eats the fruits of action and the paramaatma bird remains a mere witness, is given in this Upanishad the motto of India, “Truth alone triumphs” is also derived from this upanishad!

सत्यमेव जयते जनताः सत्येन पञ्चा हितो देवयान:

The smallest of all upanishads is Maandukya upanishad (contains only twelve mantras!). Manduka (मण्डुक) means “frog”. As a frog can leap from the first to the fourth step of a stairs without having to climb each stair, this upanishad gives the way to transcend the three stages of awakening (jaagrati), dream (swapna), and sleep (susupti) and reach the fourth stage of turiya through the worship of Pranava.

7. Taittiriya (तैत्तिरीय) upanishad

This belongs to the Krishna Yajur Veda. This has three chapters: Seekshaa valli deals with aspects of studies and teaching, various upaasananas including that of pranava, aavahanti homa mantras, fundamental duties and values etc. The famous statements that “mother, father, teacher and guest are personifications of divinities” occur in this chapter.

मातृ देवी भव। फितु देवी भव। 
आपार्य देवी भव। अतिधिदेवी भव।

The second chapter, brahmaananda valli, deals with an unique analysis of five sheaths - panca kosas namely, annamaya (food), praana maya (life), mano maya (mind), vijnaana maya (knowledge) and aananda maya (bliss) sheaths. The popular inquiry of “bliss” in an ascending order culminating with ‘brahmaananda’ is expounded at the end of this chapter.

The third chapter, brighu valli, is the teaching (upadesa) of Varuna to his son Brighu where he enables his son to go through an intense enquiry of the Self through the stages of the panca kosas, and the son finally achieves the results. The value of food - "do not abuse food, grow more food; do not waste food"- is given in detail. The chapter ends with the proclamation that the Realized Jiva thinks that he alone is the food, the one who eats it, the one who generated link between the food and the eater. He sings in bliss where himself and divinity are One.

8. Aitareya आितरेय Upanishad

This is placed at the end of the Aitareya Aranyaka of Rig veda and is so called because it came through the revelation of the rishi Aitareya. This expounds the cycle of life and death according to one’s own merits (punya) and demerits (paapa) and how freedom from
this cycle is possible through knowledge (jnaana) of the nature of aatma. This contains the great saying “prajnaanam brahma”.

9. Chaandogya (चाङ्दोग्य) Upanishad

This is placed in the chaandogya braahmana portion of saama veda. The term ‘chaandoga’ means ‘the one who sings the saama gaana’. This Upanishad deals with several disciplines (vidya) like akshi vidya, aakaasa vidya, saandilya vidya, praana vidya, panchaagni vidya etc. The most important vidya is dahara vidya which deals with the realization of the limitless spatial expanse of the Paramaatman within the small space (aakaasa) of the Jiva. It contains several popular stories such as that of Satyakaama, Uddalaka Aaruni etc. This also gives the famous mahaavaakhya “tat tvam asi”!

10. Brahadaaranyka (ब्रह्मदारण्यक) Upanishad

This is the biggest of all the Upanishads and occurs as the entire aaranyaka portion of sukla yajur veda! There are two versions of this, the Maadhyandina version and the Kaanva version. Adi Sankara’s commentary is on the Kaanva version only. It contains 3 kaandas (Madhu, Muni and Khila kaandas) divided in to six chapters. In this Upanishad, the Atman is described through a series of negations as “not this, not this”, known as neti neti (नेति नेति - न + न) vaada . According to this argument, the world, the body and the mind have to be negated and the Atman is realized as transcending any description through words! It starts with the famous saying,

अस्ति मा सदृशम ।
तस्मिन मा ज्ञेतिष्ठयम ।
मृत्युमयं अमृतं गमय ॥

(lead me [by giving knowledge] from unreal to real; from darkness [ignorance] to light; from death [limitation] to immortality [limitless])

This Upanishad relates stories of brahma jnanis like kings Aajaata Satru and Janaka; that women were also brahma vaadins, in the story of Gargi! Madhu kaanda gives the message that everything is the manifestation of Paramaatman and that a realized Jiva will feel that the entire creation is as sweet as honey! Muni kaanda relates the advaitic philosophic discussions of Sage Yaajnavalkya with King Janaka, and his council of scholars, the sage’s vedantic instructions to his wife Maitreyi etc. Khila kaanda consolidates many messages that lie scattered at various places (khila - scattered)!

If the samhita is like a tree, the braahmanas are its flowers, the aaranyakas are the fruits in the unripened state and the upanishads are the ripe fruits. They being the most important part of the vedas, they are rightly known as “sruti siras” or the head of the vedas!!