

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2023, Term 1

Reading 1.5

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

*All this is full. All that is full.
From fullness, fullness comes.
When fullness is taken from fullness,
Fullness still remains.
OM shanti shanti shanti*

CHAPTER II

The Path to Immortality

4.1 “Maitreyi,” Yajnavalkya said to his wife one day, “the time has come for me to go forth from the worldly life. Come, my dear, let me divide my property between you and Katyayani.”

MAITREYI

4.2 My lord, if I could get all the wealth in the world, would it help me to go beyond death?

YAJNAVALKYA

Not at all. You would live and die like any other rich person. No one can buy immortality with money.

MAITREYI

4.3 Of what use then are money and material possessions to me? Please tell me, my lord, of the way that leads to immortality.

YAJNAVALKYA

4.4 You have always been dear to me, Maitreyi, and I love you even more now that you have asked me about immortality. Sit here by my side and reflect deeply on what I say.

4.5 A wife loves her husband not for his own sake, dear, but because the Self lives in him.
A husband loves his wife not for her own sake, dear, but because the Self lives in her.

Children are loved not for their own sake, but because the Self lives in them.
Wealth is loved not for its own sake, but because the Self lives in it.

Brahmins are loved not for their own sake, but because the Self lives in them.
Kshatriyas are loved not for their own sake, but because the Self lives in them.

The universe is loved not for its own sake, but because the Self lives in it.
The gods are loved not for their own sake, but because the Self lives in them.

Creatures are loved not for their own sake, but because the Self lives in them.
Everything is loved not for its own sake, but because the Self lives in it.

This Self has to be realized. Hear about this Self and meditate upon him, Maitreyi. When you hear about the Self, meditate upon the Self, and finally realize the Self, you come to understand everything in life.

4.6 For brahmins confuse those who regard them as separate from the Self.
Kshatriyas confuse those who regard them as separate from the Self.
The universe confuses those who regard it as separate from the Self.
Gods and creatures confuse those who regard them as separate from the Self.
Everything confuses those who regard things as separate from the Self.
Brahmins, kshatriyas, creatures, the universe, the gods, everything: these are the Self.

4.7 No one can understand the sounds of a drum without understanding both drum and drummer;
4.8 nor the sounds of a conch without understanding both the conch and its blower;
4.9 nor the sounds of a vina without understanding both vina and musician.

4.10 As clouds of smoke arise from a fire laid with damp fuel, even so from the Supreme have issued forth all the Vedas, history, arts, sciences, poetry, aphorisms, and commentaries. All these are the breath of the Supreme.

4.11 As there can be no water without the sea, no touch without the skin, no smell without the nose, no taste without the tongue, no form without the eye, no sound without the ear, no thought without the mind, no wisdom without the heart, no work without hands, no walking without feet, no scriptures without the word, so there can be nothing without the Self.

4.12 As a lump of salt thrown in water dissolves and cannot be taken out again, though wherever we taste the water it is salty, even so, beloved, the separate self dissolves in the sea of pure consciousness, infinite and immortal. Separateness arises from identifying the Self with the body, which is made up of the elements; when this physical identification dissolves, there can be no more separate self. This is what I want to tell you, beloved.

MAITREYI

4.13 I am bewildered, Blessed One, when you say there is then no separate self.

YAJNAVALKYA

Reflect on what I have said, beloved, and you will not be confused.

4.14 As long as there is separateness, one sees another as separate from oneself, hears another as separate from oneself, smells another as separate from oneself, speaks to another as separate from oneself, thinks of another as separate from oneself, knows another as separate from oneself. But when the Self is realized as the indivisible unity of life, who can be seen by whom, who can be heard by whom, who can be smelled by whom, who can be spoken to by whom, who can be thought of by whom, who can be known by whom? Maitreyi, my beloved, how can the knower ever be known?

CHAPTER III The Imperishable [I]

1 King Janaka of Videha once performed a lavish sacrifice and distributed many gifts. Many wise men from Kuru and Panchala attended the ceremony, and Janaka wanted to know who was the wisest among them. So he drove a thousand cows into a pen, and between the horns of each cow he fastened ten gold coins.

2 Then he said: “Venerable brahmins, these cows are for the wisest one among you. Let him take them away.” None of the other brahmins dared to speak, but Yajnavalkya said to his pupil Samashrava: “Son, you can drive these cows home.” “Hero of seers!” his pupil exclaimed joyfully, and he drove them home. The other brahmins were furious. “How presumptuous!” they shouted. And Ashvala, the royal priest, asked: “Yajnavalkya, do you really believe you are the wisest of those assembled here?” Yajnavalkya replied: “I salute the wisest, but I want those cows.”

[8]

1 Then Gargi, daughter of Vachaknu, said: “Venerable brahmins, I shall ask Yajnavalkya only two questions. If he answers them well, no one here can defeat him in a spiritual debate.”

“Ask, Gargi,” the sage replied.

GARGI

2 Yajnavalkya, as a warrior from Kashi or Videha rises with bow and arrow to fell his opponent, I rise to fell you with two questions.

YAJNAVALKYA

Ask them, Gargi.

GARGI

3 That which is above heaven and below the earth, which is also between heaven and earth, which is the same through past, present, and future, in what is that woven, warp and woof? Tell me, Yajnavalkya.

YAJNAVALKYA

4 That which is above heaven and below earth, which is also between heaven and earth, which is the same through the past, present, and future – that is woven, warp and woof, in space.

GARGI

5 My first question is answered well. Now for my second question.

YAJNAVALKYA

Ask, Gargi.

GARGI

6 In what is space itself woven, warp and woof? Tell me, Yajnavalkya.

YAJNAVALKYA

7–8 The sages call it Akshara, the Imperishable. It is neither big nor small, neither long nor short, neither hot nor cold, neither bright nor dark, neither air nor space. It is without attachment, without taste, smell, or touch, without eyes, ears, tongue, mouth, breath, or mind, without movement, without limitation, without inside or outside. It consumes nothing, and nothing consumes it.

9 In perfect accord with the will of the Imperishable, sun and moon make their orbits; heaven and earth remain in place; moments, hours, days, nights, fortnights, months, and seasons become years; rivers starting from the snow-clad mountains flow east and west, north and south, to the sea.

10 Without knowing the Imperishable, Gargi, whoever performs rites and ceremonies and under goes austerities, even for many years, reaps little benefit, because rites, ceremonies, and austerities are all perishable. Whosoever dies without knowing the Imperishable dies in a pitiable state; but those who know the Imperishable attain immortality when the body is shed at death.

11 The Imperishable is the seer, Gargi, though unseen; the hearer, though unheard; the thinker, though unthought; the knower, though unknown. Nothing other than the Imperishable can see, hear, think, or know. It is in the Imperishable that space is woven, warp and woof.

GARGI

12 Venerable brahmins, count yourselves fortunate if you get away with merely paying this man homage. No one can defeat Yajnavalkya in debate about Brahman. With these words Gargi ended her questions.

CHAPTER IV

The States of Consciousness

1 Yajnavalkya came to Janaka, king of Videha, saying to himself, “I will not talk today.” But earlier, while they were discussing the fire ceremony, Yajnavalkya had promised him any boon he wanted. Now the king asked the sage permission to question him.

JANAKA

2 Yajnavalkya, what is the light of man?

YAJNAVALKYA

The sun is our light, for by that light we sit, work, go out, and come back.

JANAKA

3 When the sun sets, what is the light of man?

YAJNAVALKYA

The moon is our light, for by that light we sit, work, go out, and come back.

JANAKA

4 When the sun sets, Yajnavalkya, and the moon sets, what is the light of man?

YAJNAVALKYA

Fire is our light, for by that we sit, work, go out, and come back.

JANAKA

5 When the sun sets, Yajnavalkya, and the moon sets, and the fire goes out, what is the light of man?

YAJNAVALKYA

Then speech is our light, for by that we sit, work, go out, and come back. Even though we cannot see our own hand in the dark, we can hear what is said and move toward the person speaking.

JANAKA

6 When the sun sets, Yajnavalkya, and the moon sets, and the fire goes out and no one speaks, what is the light of man?

YAJNAVALKYA

The Self indeed is the light of man, your majesty, for by that we sit, work, go out, and come back.

JANAKA

7 Who is that Self?

YAJNAVALKYA

The Self, pure awareness, shines as the light within the heart, surrounded by the senses. Only seeming to think, seeming to move, the Self neither sleeps nor wakes nor dreams.

8 When the Self takes on a body, he seems to assume the body's frailties and limitations; but when he sheds the body at the time of death, the Self leaves all these behind.

9 The human being has two states of consciousness: one in this world, the other in the next. But there is a third state between them, not unlike the world of dreams, in which we are aware of both worlds, with their sorrows and joys. When a person dies, it is only the physical body that dies; that person lives on in a nonphysical body, which carries the impressions of his past life. It is these impressions that determine his next life. In this intermediate state, he makes and dissolves impressions by the light of the Self.

10 In that third state of consciousness there are no chariots, no horses drawing them or roads on which to travel, but he makes up his own chariots, horses, and roads. In that state, there are no joys or pleasures, but he makes up his own joys and pleasures. In that state, there are no lotus ponds, no lakes, no rivers, but he makes up his own lotus ponds, lakes, and rivers. It is he who makes up all these from the impressions of his past or waking life.

11–13 It is said of these states of consciousness that in the dreaming state, when one is sleeping, the shining Self, who never dreams, who is ever awake, watches by his own light the dreams woven out of past deeds and present desires. In the dreaming state, when one is sleeping, the shining Self keeps the body alive with the vital force of prana, and wanders wherever he wills. In the dreaming state, when one is sleeping, the shining Self assumes many forms, eats with friends, indulges in sex, sees fearsome spectacles.

16–17 But he is not affected by anything because he is detached and free; and after wandering here and there in the state of dreaming, enjoying pleasures and seeing good and evil, he returns to the state from which he began.

18 As a great fish swims between the banks of a river as it likes, so does the shining Self move between the states of dreaming and waking.

19 As an eagle, weary after soaring in the sky, folds its wings and flies down to rest in its nest, so does the shining Self enter the state of dreamless sleep, where one is freed from all desires.

21 The Self is free from desire, free from evil, free from fear. As a man in the arms of his beloved is not aware of what is without and what is within, so a person in union with the Self is not aware of what is

without and what is within, for in that unitive state all desires find their perfect fulfillment. There is no other desire that needs to be fulfilled, and one goes beyond sorrow.

22 In that unitive state there is neither father nor mother, neither worlds nor gods nor even scriptures. In that state there is neither thief nor slayer, neither low caste nor high, neither monk nor ascetic. The Self is beyond good and evil, beyond all the suffering of the human heart.

23–30 In that unitive state one sees without seeing, for there is nothing separate from him; smells without smelling, for there is nothing separate from him; tastes without tasting, for there is nothing separate from him; speaks without speaking, for there is nothing separate from him; hears without hearing, for there is nothing separate from him; touches without touching, for there is nothing separate from him; thinks without thinking, for there is nothing separate from him; knows without knowing, for there is nothing separate from him.

31 Where there is separateness, one sees another, smells another, tastes another, speaks to another, hears another, touches another, thinks of another, knows another.

32 But where there is unity, one without a second, that is the world of Brahman. This is the supreme goal of life, the supreme treasure, the supreme joy. Those who do not seek this supreme goal live on but a fraction of this joy.

JANAKA

33 I give you another thousand cows! Please teach me more of the way to Self-realization.

YAJNAVALKYA

35 As a heavily laden cart creaks as it moves along, the body groans under its burden when a person is about to die.

36 When the body grows weak through old age or illness, the Self separates himself as a mango or fig or banyan fruit frees itself from the stalk, and returns the way he came to begin another life.

37 Just as when a king is expected to visit a village, the mayor and all the other officials turn out to welcome him with food and drink, all creation awaits the person who sheds his body having realized Brahman. “Here he comes!” they say. “Here comes Brahman himself!”

38 But the senses, while that man lies dying, gather around and mourn the Self’s departure, as courtiers mourn when their king is about to leave.

[4]

1 When body and mind grow weak, the Self gathers in all the powers of life and descends with them into the heart. As *prana* leaves the eye, it ceases to see.

2 “He is becoming one,” say the wise; “he does not see. He is becoming one; he no longer hears. He is becoming one; he no longer speaks, or tastes, or smells, or thinks, or knows.” By the light of the heart the Self leaves the body by one of its gates; and when he leaves, *prana* follows, and with it all the vital powers of the body. He who is dying merges in consciousness, and thus consciousness accompanies him when he departs, along with the impressions of all that he has done, experienced, and known.

3 As a caterpillar, having come to the end of one blade of grass, draws itself together and reaches out for the next, so the Self, having come to the end of one life and dispelled all ignorance, gathers in his faculties and reaches out from the old body to a new.

4 As a goldsmith fashions an old ornament into a new and more beautiful one, so the Self, having reached the end of the last life and dispelled all ignorance, makes for himself a new, more beautiful shape, like that of the devas or other celestial beings.

5 The Self is indeed Brahman, but through ignorance people identify it with intellect, mind, senses, passions, and the elements of earth, water, air, space, and fire. This is why the Self is said to consist of this and that, and appears to be everything.

As a person acts, so he becomes in life. Those who do good become good; those who do harm become bad. Good deeds make one pure; bad deeds make one impure. You are what your deep, driving desire is. As your desire is, so is your will. As your will is, so is your deed. As your deed is, so is your destiny.

6 We live in accordance with our deep, driving desire. It is this desire at the time of death that determines what our next life will be. We will come back to earth to work out the satisfaction of that desire. But not those who are free from desire; they are free because all their desires have found fulfillment in the Self. They do not die like the others; but realizing Brahman, they merge in Brahman.

7 So it is said: When all the desires that surge in the heart
Are renounced, the mortal becomes immortal.

When all the knots that strangle the heart
Are loosened, the mortal becomes immortal,
Here in this very life.

As the skin of a snake is sloughed onto an anthill, so does the mortal body fall; but the Self, freed from the body, merges in Brahman, infinite life, eternal light.

JANAKA

I give you another thousand cows! Please teach me more of the way to Self-realization.

YAJNAVALKYA

23 Those who realize the Self enter into the peace that brings complete self-control and perfect patience. They see themselves in everyone and everyone in themselves. Evil cannot overcome them because they overcome all evil. Sin cannot consume them because they consume all sin. Free from evil, free from sin and doubt, they live in the kingdom of Brahman. Your majesty, this kingdom is yours!

JANAKA

Venerable One, I offer myself and my kingdom in your service.

CHAPTER V
What the Thunder Said
[2]

The children of Prajapati, the Creator – gods, human beings, and asuras, the godless – lived with their father as students. When they had completed the allotted period, the gods said, “Venerable One, please teach us.”

Prajapati answered with one syllable: “*Da.*”

“Have you understood?” he asked.

“Yes,” they said. “You have told us *damyata*, be self-controlled.”

“You have understood,” he said.

2 Then the human beings approached. “Venerable One, please teach us.”

Prajapati answered with one syllable: “*Da.*”

“Have you understood?” he asked.

“Yes,” they said. “You have told us *datta*, give.”

“You have understood,” he said.

Then the godless approached. “Venerable One, please teach us.”

Prajapati answered with the same syllable: “*Da.*”

“Have you understood?” he asked.

“Yes,” they said. “You have told us *dayadhvam*, be compassionate.”

“You have understood,” he said.

The heavenly voice of the thunder repeats this teaching.

Da-da-da!

Be self-controlled! Give! Be compassionate!