

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term I.1

Upanishads

1. Karma

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

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.

He who is dying merges in consciousness, and this consciousness accompanies him when he departs, along with the impressions of all that he has done, experienced, and known.

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.

2. The Cycle of Birth and Death

The Katha Upanishad

4 If one fails to realize Brahman in this life
Before the physical sheath is shed,
He must again put on a body
In the world of embodied creatures.

7 Of those
Unaware of the Self, some are born as
Embodied creatures while others remain
In a lower stage of evolution,
As determined by their own need for growth.

3. Multiplicity and Desire

10 What is here is also there; what is there,
Also here. Who sees multiplicity

But not the one indivisible Self
Must wander on and on from death to death.

14 As the rain on a mountain peak runs off
The slopes on all sides, so those who see
Only the seeming multiplicity of life
Run after things on every side.

2 The immature run after sense pleasures
And fall into the widespread net of death.

7 Those who lack
Discrimination, with little control
Over their thoughts and far from pure,
Reach not the pure state of immortality
But wander from death to death.

4. The Self and the Ego/Body

The Mundaka Upanishad

1 Like two golden birds perched on the selfsame tree,
Intimate friends, the ego and the Self
Dwell in the same body. The former eats
The sweet and sour fruits of the tree of life
While the latter looks on in detachment.

2 As long as we think we are the ego,
We feel attached and fall into sorrow.
But realize that you are the Self, the Lord
Of life, and you will be freed from sorrow.

3 When you realize that you are the Self,
Supreme source of light, supreme source of love,
You transcend the duality of life
And enter into the unitive state.

The Katha Upanishad

13 There are two selves, the separate ego
And the indivisible *Atman*. When
One rises above I and me and mine,
The *Atman* is revealed as one's real Self.

7 Above the senses is the mind, above

The mind is the intellect, above that
 Is the ego, and above the ego
 Is the unmanifested Cause.
 8 And beyond is Brahman, omnipresent,
 Attributeless. Realizing him one is released
 From the cycle of birth and death.

“I am my body; when my body dies,
 I die.” Living in this superstition,
 They fall life after life under [the god of death’s] sway.

The Kena Upanishad

4 The Self is realized in a higher state
 Of consciousness when you have broken through
 The wrong identification that you are
 The body, subject to birth and death.
 To be the Self is to go beyond death.

5 Realize the Self, the shining goal of life!
 If you do not, there is only darkness.
 See the Self in all, and go beyond death.

5. Renunciation and Meditation

The Mundaka Upanishad

5 By truth, meditation, and self-control
 One can enter into this state of joy
 And see the Self shining in a pure heart.

6 They have attained the summit of wisdom
 By the steep path of renunciation.
 They have attained to immortality
 And are united with the Lord of Love.

The Katha Upanishad

9 He [Brahman] is formless, and can never be seen
 With these two eyes. But he reveals himself
 In the heart made pure through meditation
 And sense-restraint. Realizing him, one is
 Released from the cycle of birth and death.

24 The Self cannot be known by anyone
 Who desists not from unrighteous ways,

Controls not the senses, stills not the mind,
And practices not meditation.

14 When all desires that surge in the heart
Are renounced, the mortal becomes immortal.

15 When all the knots that strangle the heart
Are loosened, the mortal becomes immortal.
This sums up the teaching of the scriptures.

Nachiketa learned from the king of death
The whole discipline of meditation.
Freeing himself from all separateness,
He won immortality in Brahman.
So blessed is everyone who knows the Self!

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

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.

6. Vedic Sacrifices do not free from Samsara

The Mundaka Upanishad

1 The rituals and the sacrifices described
In the Vedas deal with lower knowledge.
The sages ignored these rituals
And went in search of higher knowledge.

7 Such rituals are unsafe rafts for crossing
The sea of *samsara*, of birth and death.
Doomed to shipwreck are those who try to cross
The sea of *samsara* on these poor rafts.

8 Ignorant of their ignorance, yet wise
In their own esteem, these deluded men
Proud of their vain learning go round and round
Like the blind led by the blind.

9–10 Living in darkness, immature, unaware
Of any higher good or goal, they fall
Again and again into the sea.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

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.

7. Realize the Self and be free from Death

The Katha Upanishad

1 The self-existent Lord pierced the senses
To turn outward. Thus we look to the world
Without and see not the Self within us.
A sage withdrew his senses from the world
Of change and, seeking immortality,
Looked within and beheld the deathless Self.

18 The all-knowing Self was never born,
Nor will it die. Beyond cause and effect,
This Self is eternal and immutable.
When the body dies, the Self does not die.

20 Hidden in the heart of every creature
Exists the Self, subtler than the subtlest,
Greater than the greatest. They go beyond
All sorrow who extinguish their self-will
And behold the glory of the Self
Through the grace of the Lord of Love.

25 None else can know the omnipresent Self,
Whose glory sweeps away the rituals
Of the priest and the prowess of the warrior
And puts death itself to death.

15 The supreme Self is beyond name and form,
Beyond the senses, inexhaustible,
Without beginning, without end, beyond
Time, space, and causality, eternal,
Immutable.
Those who realize the Self
Are forever free from the jaws of death.

They go beyond
Sorrow who meditate on the Self and

Are freed from the cycle of birth and death.
For this Self is supreme!

8. Unity with Atman/Brahman

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

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.

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.

The Katha Upanishad

15 As pure water poured into pure water
Becomes the very same, so does the Self
Of the illumined man or woman, Nachiketa,
Verily become one with the Godhead.

The Mundaka Upanishad

8 The flowing river is lost in the sea;
The illumined sage is lost in the Self.
The flowing river has become the sea;
The illumined sage has become the Self.

The Isha Upanishad

17 May my life merge in the Immortal
When my body is reduced to ashes.
O mind, meditate on the eternal Brahman.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

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.