

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term 1

Reading 1.2

The Katha Upanishad

*May the Lord of Love protect us.
May the Lord of Love nourish us.
May the Lord of Love strengthen us.
May we realize the Lord of Love.
May we live with love for all;
May we live in peace with all.
OM shanti shanti shanti*

PART I [1]

1 Once, long ago, Vajasravasa gave away his possessions to gain religious merit. He had a son named Nachiketa who, 2 though only a boy, was full of faith in the scriptures. Nachiketa thought when the offerings were made: 3 “What merit can one obtain by giving away cows that are too old to give milk?” 4 To help his father understand this, Nachiketa said: “To whom will you offer me?” He asked this again and again. “To death I give you!” said his father in anger. 5 The son thought: “I go, the first of many who will die, in the midst of many who are dying, on a mission to Yama, king of death.

6 See how it was with those who came before,
How it will be with those who are living.
Like corn, mortals ripen and fall; like corn,
They come up again.”

NACHIKETA

20 When a person dies, there arises this doubt:
“He still exists,” say some; “he does not,”
Say others. I want you to teach me the truth.

22 This doubt haunted even the gods of old;
For it is hard to know, O Death, as you say.
I can have no greater teacher than you,
And there is no boon equal to this.”

28 Having approached an immortal like you,
 How can I, subject to old age and death,
 Ever try to rejoice in a long life
 For the sake of the senses' fleeting pleasures?

29 Dispel this doubt of mine, O king of death:
 Does a person live after death or does he not?
 Nachiketa asks for no other boon
 Than the secret of this great mystery.

YAMA

1 The joy of the spirit ever abides,
 But not what seems pleasant to the senses.
 Both these, differing in their purpose, prompt
 Us to action. All is well for those who choose
 The joy of the spirit, but they miss
 The goal of life who prefer the pleasant.

2 Perennial joy or passing pleasure?
 This is the choice one is to make always.
 Those who are wise recognize this, but not
 The ignorant. The first welcome what leads
 To abiding joy, though painful at the time.
 The latter run, goaded by their senses,
 After what seems immediate pleasure.

3 Well have you renounced these passing pleasures
 So dear to the senses, Nachiketa,
 And turned your back on the way of the world
 That makes mankind forget the goal of life.

4 Far apart are wisdom and ignorance.
 The first leads one to Self-realization;
 The second makes one more and more
 Estranged from one's real Self. I regard you,
 Nachiketa, as worthy of instruction,
 For passing pleasures tempt you not at all.

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

6 Far beyond
 Their eyes, hypnotized by the world of sense,

Opens the way to immortality.
 “I am my body; when my body dies,
 I die.” Living in this superstition,
 They fall life after life under my sway.

7 It is but few who hear about the Self.
 Fewer still dedicate their lives to its
 Realization. Wonderful is the one
 Who speaks about the Self. Rare are they
 Who make it the supreme goal of their lives.
 Blessed are they who, through an illumined
 Teacher, attain to Self-realization.

8 The truth of the Self cannot come through one
 Who has not realized that he is the Self.
 The intellect cannot reveal the Self,
 Beyond its duality of subject
 And object. Those who see themselves in all
 And all in them help others through spiritual
 Osmosis to realize the Self themselves.

9 This awakening you have known comes not
 Through logic and scholarship, but from
 Close association with a realized teacher.
 Wise are you, Nachiketa, because you
 Seek the Self eternal. May we have more
 Seekers like you!

NACHIKETA

10 I know that earthly treasures are transient,
 And never can I reach the eternal through them.
 Hence have I renounced all my desires for earthly
 treasures
 To win the eternal through your instruction.

YAMA

12 The wise, realizing through meditation
 The timeless Self, beyond all perception,
 Hidden in the cave of the heart,
 Leave pain and pleasure far behind.

13 Those who know they are neither body nor mind
 But the immemorial Self, the divine
 Principle of existence, find the source

Of all joy and live in joy abiding.
 I see the gates of joy are opening
 For you, Nachiketa.

NACHIKETA

14 Teach me of That you see as beyond right
 And wrong, cause and effect, past and future.

YAMA

15 I will give you the Word all the scriptures
 Glorify, all spiritual disciplines
 Express, to attain which aspirants lead
 A life of sense-restraint and self-naughting.

16 It is *OM*. This symbol of the Godhead
 Is the highest. Realizing it one finds
 Complete fulfillment of all one's longings.

17 It is of the greatest support to all seekers.
 When *OM* reverberates unceasingly
 Within the heart, that one is indeed blessed
 And deeply loved as one who is the 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.

19 If the slayer believes that he can kill
 Or the slain believes that he can be killed,
 Neither knows the truth. The eternal Self
 Slays not, nor is ever slain.

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.

21 Though one sits in meditation in a
 Particular place, the Self within
 Can exercise his influence far away.

Though still, he moves everything everywhere.

22 When the wise realize the Self,
 Formless in the midst of forms, changeless
 In the midst of change, omnipresent
 And supreme, they go beyond sorrow.

23 The Self cannot be known through study
 Of the scriptures, nor through the intellect,
 Nor through hearing discourses about it.
 The Self can be attained only by those
 Whom the Self chooses. Verily unto them
 Does the Self reveal himself.

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.

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.

[3]

1 In the secret cave of the heart, two are
 Seated by life's fountain. The separate ego
 Drinks of the sweet and bitter stuff,
 Liking the sweet, disliking the bitter,
 While the supreme Self drinks sweet and bitter
 Neither liking this nor disliking that.
 The ego gropes in darkness, while the Self
 Lives in light. So declare the illumined sages
 And the householders who worship
 The sacred fire in the name of the Lord.

2 May we light the fire of Nachiketa
 That burns out the ego and enables us
 To pass from fearful fragmentation
 To fearless fullness in the changeless whole.

3 Know the Self as lord of the chariot,
 The body as the chariot itself,
 The discriminating intellect as
 The charioteer, and the mind as reins.

4 The senses, say the wise, are the horses;
Selfish desires are the roads they travel.
When the Self is confused with the body,
Mind, and senses, they point out, he seems
To enjoy pleasure and suffer sorrow.

5 When a person lacks discrimination
And his mind is undisciplined, the senses
Run hither and thither like wild horses.

6 But they obey the rein like trained horses
When one has discrimination and
Has made the mind one-pointed.

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;

8 but those
Who have discrimination, with a still mind
And a pure heart, reach journey's end,
Never again to fall into the jaws of death.

9 With a discriminating intellect
As charioteer and a trained mind as reins,
They attain the supreme goal of life,
To be united with the Lord of Love.

10 The senses derive from objects of sense-perception,
Sense objects from mind, mind from intellect,
And intellect from ego;

11 ego from undifferentiated
Consciousness, and consciousness from Brahman.
Brahman is the First Cause and last refuge.

12 Brahman, the hidden Self in everyone,
Does not shine forth. He is revealed only
To those who keep their minds one-pointed
On the Lord of Love and thus develop
A superconscious manner of knowing.

13 Meditation enables them to go
Deeper and deeper into consciousness,

From the world of words to the world of thoughts,
Then beyond thoughts to wisdom in the Self.

14 Get up! Wake up! Seek the guidance of an
Illumined teacher and realize the Self.
Sharp like a razor's edge, the sages say,
Is the path, difficult to traverse.

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.

16 The wise, who gain experiential knowledge
Of this timeless tale of Nachiketa,
Narrated by Death, attain the glory
Of living in spiritual awareness.
Those who, full of devotion, recite this
Supreme mystery at a spiritual
Gathering are fit for eternal life.
They are indeed fit for eternal life.

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.

2 The immature run after sense pleasures
And fall into the widespread net of death.
But the wise, knowing the Self as deathless,
Seek not the changeless in the world of change.

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.

11 Only the one-pointed mind attains
This state of unity. There is no one
But the Self. Who sees multiplicity
But not the one indivisible Self

Must wander on and on from death to death.

6 Now, O Nachiketa, I will tell you
Of this unseen, eternal Brahman, and
What befalls the Self after death.

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.

8 That which is awake even in our sleep,
Giving form in dreams to the objects of
Sense craving, that indeed is pure light,
Brahman the immortal, who contains all
The cosmos, and beyond whom none can go.
For this Self is supreme!

13 Changeless amidst the things that pass away,
Pure consciousness in all who are conscious,
The One answers the prayers of many.
Eternal peace is theirs who see the Self
In their own hearts. To none else does it come!

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 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.

9 He 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.

10 When the five senses are stilled, when the mind
Is stilled, when the intellect is stilled,

That is called the highest state by the wise.

11 They say yoga is this complete stillness
 In which one enters the unitive state,
 Never to become separate again.
 If one is not established in this state,
 The sense of unity will come and go.

12 The unitive state cannot be attained
 Through words or thoughts or through the eye.
 How can it be attained except through one
 Who is established in this state oneself?

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.

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.

16 From the heart there radiate a hundred
 And one vital tracks. One of them rises
 To the crown of the head. This way leads
 To immortality, the others to death.

17 The Lord of Love, not larger than the thumb,
 Is ever enshrined in the hearts of all.
 Draw him clear out of the physical sheath,
 As one draws the stalk from the *munja* grass.
 Know thyself to be pure and immortal!
 Know thyself to be pure and immortal!

THE NARRATOR

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!

OM shanti shanti shanti