

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term I.1

### Opening Comments

I want to welcome all of you to the Mercy Seminar for 2026! This is the seventh year we have been holding the Mercy Seminar, and the theme for this year is “Peace at the Last: The Meaning of Life in the Light of Death.” We will be examining this theme over the course of three six-week terms. This term we will be exploring the meaning of life in the light of death in the authoritative writings of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. After Easter, we will be exploring this theme in the Jewish and Muslim traditions. And in the fall, we will investigate this question in the Christian and Spiritualist traditions.

I come at this work both from my study of world religions in college and graduate school, and from my participation in the International Theology Conference at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem from 2004 to 2018. This conference included Jewish, Muslim, and Christian participants, and we spent our time together in small groups studying the authoritative texts of each tradition on a particular theme. David and I met in Jerusalem one year and dreamed up the Mercy Seminar, which is built on the template we followed at the Hartman Institute, which in turn is based on the rabbinic practice of *hevruta*, in which you find a friend with whom to study. This work has been deeply transformative for me, and I hope you will find the same to be true for yourselves.

We begin this term with an exploration of the meaning of life in the light of death with the Upanishads. Hindus, who call themselves *Sanatana Dharma*, followers of the eternal law ordering the universe, generally divide their scriptures into two categories: heard or revealed (*Sruti*) and remembered (*Smriti*). **Sruti** scriptures are believed to be communicated directly by God to ancient Indian sages; **Smriti** scriptures are less authoritative, and consist of texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, which we will be reading in the third week of this term.

**The Sruti Scriptures** are called the **Vedas (meaning knowledge)**, and form the most authoritative Scriptures for Hindus. The Vedas comprise a large body of Scripture representing three distinct kinds of literature:

**Karma-kanda:** *Samhitas* (hymns and songs to deities like Indra) and *Brahmanas* (priestly rituals, including wedding and funeral ceremonies still observed today)

**Upasana-kanda:** *Aranyakas* from forest retreats or ashrams, dealing with yoga and meditation

**Jnana-kanda:** *Upanishads* dealing with the knowledge that liberates us from illusion and death.

The Upanishads were composed by anonymous sages in the forest academies between 800 and 300 BCE. There are over one hundred Upanishads, but of these there are ten or eleven that are considered to be the most important, and we are reading selections from this collection. The Upanishads were written by various priests and warriors who were dissatisfied with the practice of sacrifice established by the Vedas, leading them to withdraw into the forests along the Ganges to explore the nature of human consciousness through meditation, in order to realize the nature of our true Self.

A sage withdrew his senses from the world  
Of change and, seeking immortality,  
Looked within and beheld the deathless Self.

As we see in tonight's readings, the main problem they saw in the sacrifices is that they do not actually liberate us from death.

Without knowing the Imperishable, whoever performs rites and ceremonies and undergoes 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.

This leads the authors of the Upanishads to call such practices the lower form of knowledge, compared to the realization of the Self, which alone leads to the attainment of immortality.

The study of the Vedas, linguistics,  
Rituals, astronomy, and all the arts  
Can be called lower knowledge. The higher  
Is that which leads to Self-realization.

The Upanishads assume a personal relationship between a sage and a student, and were likely studied in this context, in the forest academies that sprang up along the Ganges River. The name Upanishad itself suggests sitting beside a sage, as well as the mystery that will be communicated from the sage to the student. The Upanishads are therefore to be studied one-on-one, with a realized Sage and a properly oriented student.

Seek a teacher who has realized the Self.  
To a student whose heart is full of love,  
Who has conquered his senses and passions,  
The teacher will reveal the Lord of Love.

We also see the importance of the personal qualities of the student:

Let this wisdom be taught only to those  
 Who obey the law of life's unity.  
 Let this wisdom be taught only to those  
 Who offer their lives to the Lord of Love.

As we see in tonight's readings, the main reason that the sacrifices do not lead to immortality is that they do not free us from the effects of karma. The term karma comes from the Vedic sacrifices, and refers to the effects of successful sacrifices. In the Upanishads, karma refers to the effects of every action, both good and bad, which make the person either good or bad. But beyond actions, karma is rooted in our deepest desires, and if these desires are not satisfied in this life, we will be born again after this life to work out the satisfaction of these desires.

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. 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.

Desire is therefore the driving energy of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that the Upanishads call samsara. Our desires grow out of our identification with the ego within us, which is associated with our body. The only way to free ourselves from the cycle of samsara is by coming to the realization that we are not the ego, nor are we the body, but we are rather the Self, the Atman, which is the immortal reality permeating and uniting all things, which is also called the Lord of Love, and Brahman.

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.  
 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.

The teacher will lead the student into the practices that enable her or him to see the Self shining in the cave of the heart, and these include truth, meditation, and self-control.

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.

The goal is to free ourselves from the desires which imprison us in the endless cycle of samsara, so that we can attain to immortality even in this life, as we heard in the lectio divina for this evening.

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,  
Here in this very life.