

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term I.2

Opening Comments

PIN YOURSELF

The reading for this evening comes from the Katha Upanishad, which consists of the encounter between the young boy Nachiketa and Yama, the god of death. This Upanishad is quite long, so we are reading significant excerpts from it. The Katha Upanishad tells us a great deal about the kind of student who can profit from the instruction of a sage who has realized the Self, as exemplified by Nachiketa.

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.

One of the reasons for this praise lies in the question that Nachiketa asks Yama to answer, for it shows that he does not seek the meaning of existence in the pleasure and pain of the senses, but rather in that which abides in spite of death.

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.

As we know, the only reality that abides through all of existence is the Atman, the Self, which is also called Brahman, as well as the Lord of Love, as we see in this remarkable passage.

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.

However, Yama repeatedly reminds Nachiketa that even though it is rare and highly beneficial to hear about the Self, as distinct from the ego, the Self cannot be realized by hearing about it, or reading about it, or thinking about it. It can only be realized via a one-on-one encounter with a sage who has realized the Self.

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.

It seems at times that it is proximity to the awakened teacher that creates the same awakening in the student, through a process of spiritual osmosis:

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.

The realization of the Self cannot take place through the intellect, as our minds work by distinguishing things in the manifold realities that confront us in the universe, and the Self vastly transcends the duality of existence revealed by the mind and intellect.

15 The supreme Self is beyond name and form,
Beyond the senses, inexhaustible,
Without beginning, without end, beyond
Time, space, and causality, eternal,
Immutable.

Only the awakened teacher can lead us past the intellect to the realization of the Self.

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!

Yama then issues a call to all of us, urging us to realize that reading the Katha Upanishad will not be nearly enough to lead us to the realization of 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.

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?

Or, as we are told in the Mundaka Upanishad:

Seek a teacher who has realized the Self.

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

However, as we see in Nachiketa, the teacher will only be effective in leading the student to Self-realization if the student practices the right disciplines. If our lives are governed by the desires which lead us to seek what is pleasurable and avoid what is painful, we cannot realize the Self even under the influence of a sage.

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.

This idea is echoed in the Mundaka Upanishad, which also introduces the idea that the Self reveals itself to one who practices the right disciplines, including controlling the senses, stilling the mind, and practicing meditation:

4 Not by the weak, not by the unearnest,
Not by those who practice wrong disciplines
Can the Self be realized. The Self reveals
Himself as the Lord of Love to the one
Who practices right disciplines.

Brahman is hidden in the cave of the heart of everyone, and meditation creates the conditions in which Brahman may reveal himself to us as our true Self.

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.

Thus we find our way out of samsara, the endless realm of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth, when we practice meditation under the guidance of an awakened sage.

9 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.

Our reading for tonight also suggests that the revelation of Brahman takes place not by our own effort, as necessary as that is, but by the grace of the Lord of Love.

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.

The self-revelation of Brahman is ultimately not up to the student or the teacher, nor is it simply the result of practicing the right disciplines and meditation. The realization of the Self is ultimately up to the Self.

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.

Once the Self is realized, one goes beyond the seemingly endless dynamic of pleasure, pain, suffering and death, to a joy that knows no beginning and no end, as it is rooted in the realization that I am not the ego, I am not the body that suffers and dies, I am the Atman that was never born and never dies.

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.

Mundaka: 11 But those who are pure in heart, who practice
Meditation and conquer their senses
And passions, shall attain the immortal Self,
Source of all light and source of all life.

Mundaka: 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 Truth is victorious, never untruth.
Truth is the way; truth is the goal of life,
Reached by sages who are free from self-will.

Mundaka: 8 Beyond the reach of the senses is he,
But not beyond the reach of a mind stilled
Through the practice of deep meditation.
9 Beyond the reach of words and works is he,
But not beyond the reach of a pure heart
Freed from the sway of the senses.

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.

Self is realized through grace

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.**

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.**

Mundaka: 1 Bright but hidden, the Self dwells in the heart.
Everything that moves, breathes, opens, and closes
Lives in the Self. **He is the source of love
And may be known through love but not through thought.**
He is the goal of life. Attain this goal!

Mundaka: 3 Not through discourse, not through the intellect,
Not even through study of the scriptures
Can the Self be realized. **The Self reveals
Himself to the one who longs for the Self.
Those who long for the Self with all their heart
Are chosen by the Self as his own.**