

Outline on the Upanishads

Katha and Brihadaranyaka Upanishads

I. Suffering and Death

A. In the *Katha* and *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishads the topics of “suffering” and “death” are an occasion for exploring the nature of the self, one of the central themes of *the Upanishads* and Indian philosophy in general. “Upanishad” means “sitting near the teacher,” and so in each of these discourses, there is a guru and a student:

- In the *Katha Upanishad*, “death” (personified as the god Yama) assumes the position of guru (teacher) to Nachiketa, to instruct him about the nature of the self.
- In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* the husband Yajnavalkya assumes the role of a guru to his wife Maitreyi, to instruct her about the nature of the self.

B. The shared teaching of each of the texts is that suffering and death exist as long as a person remains in ignorance (sanskrit: *avidya*) about his/her real nature. More specifically, the texts teach that *avidya* perpetuates a cycle of death=>rebirth=>death. This cycle is called *samsara*. *Karma* (roughly, one’s tendency to think and behave in particular ways) is the fuel that drives *samsara*. *Katha* 1.2.5-6, 1.3.7, 2.2.6-7, *Brihad* 4.1-6.

II. The Self

A. The essential nature or being of each person is “the Self” (*atman*). Hence, each individual person experiences suffering and death until he/she realizes *atman*. What is *atman* exactly?

- *Atman* is not an individual soul (at least not in these Upanishads).
- *Atman* is referred to as “pure consciousness” or “pure awareness.” *Katha* 2.2.13, *Brihad* 4.7
- *Atman* is the negation of all plurality, *advaita* (not-two, or non-dual), *Brihad* 4.22-32
- *Atman* is formless, all-knowing, eternal, immutable, and omnipresent. *Katha* 1.2.18, 22; 1.3.15
- *Atman* is transcendent (beyond the world) but also immanent (fully present in it). *Katha* 1.3.15, 2.1.1, 2.2.2, 9, 12; *Brihad* 2.4.4-5,

As such, *Atman* is contrasted with the “separate self” or “false ego” (*Katha* 1.3.1., 2.3.13, *Brihad* 2.4.12-14), which is

- distinct from other things (duality)
- born and experiences death, hence is temporary
- shaped by individual attachments, desires, and sense gratification

B. Suffering and death exist only as long as the Self is not realized. When the Self is realized, suffering and death are dissolved. This state is called *moksha* or *mukti* (liberation). Katha 1.1.26-28; 1.2.1-3; 1.3.1, 3-8, 15; 2.3.2; Brihad 4.22.

C. We believe we are something we are not, a separate ego, and therefore we desire what we don't genuinely need. As a result we are unsatisfied, unhappy. The path to happiness lies in uprooting this ignorance of our true nature.

III. The Self and Brahman

A. Brahman (literally, to inflate or expand) is the name given to the ultimate reality in the Upanishads. In some passages, Brahman is described as a personal being with various wonderful attributes (saguna Brahman, Brahman with attributes or qualities). In other passages, Brahman is described as formless and attributeless (nirguna Brahman, or Brahman without attributes)

B. Brahman is said to be the cause (origin) and substance of the universe. Brahman is the source, support, and culmination of the universe. It emanates from the being of Brahman and returns to Brahman. *The Upanishads* teach a cyclical conception of the universe: the stuff/material of the universe has no beginning, but it goes through different periods of organization, evolution, and dissolution. Since Brahman is the substance of the universe, the universe is referred to as a manifestation of Brahman. Katha 2.3.2.

C. Brahman is said to be the Self (atman), meaning either that Brahman is identical with the Self or Brahman is the essence of the Self (with a plurality of atmans forming the parts or body of Brahman). Katha 1.3.12, 2.2.8, Brihad 4.4.5. The advaita Vedanta (e.g., Shankara) tradition takes the consistent teaching of the Upanishads to be that the atman of every individual ego is the same atman, and this atman is identical with Brahman. Other Vedantin schools maintain that atman and Brahman are distinct, but intimately related, like waves to the ocean, rays of light to the sun.

D. If Brahman is identical to the Self, then the Self is the source of the Universe. This theme is repeated throughout the Upanishads. Separate selves arise from the world, but the world itself arises from the Self. Everything ultimately arises from non-differentiated consciousness or pure awareness. Katha 2.2.2, 2.2.8-12, Brihad 4.4.5.

IV. Self Realization

A. While Atman appears to be a mysterious reality, it's an important teaching of the Upanishads the reality of the Self can be *known*.

B. The mind (i.e., sensing, perceiving, and thinking functions) cannot know the Self. The mind is related to objects (e.g., trees, tables, people, cars, buildings). This subject-object relation is duality, or consciousness conditioned by duality. However, atman is non-dual reality or non-dual consciousness. Since atman is not an object, it can't be known by what only knows objects. Katha 1.2.8-9, 2.3.12.

C. Atman, however, is the pure consciousness or awareness beyond the mind or that underlies the mind. It is that which experiences the mind's sensing, perceiving, and thinking. Hence, the reality of atman is *dimly reflected* in the I-thought, as it is the source of our sense of continuity or persistence, through the ever changing processes of sensing, perceiving, and thinking associated with the mind.

D. *The Upanishads* teach that the Self is known through meditation, which is the practice of stilling the activity of the mind by concentration (*dhyana*). Katha 1.2.12, 2.2.1, 2.3.9-12, Brihad 2.4.5. Patanjali would later summarize this process as "chitta vritti nirodah" (the stilling of all thought-forms of the mind). As the turbulent surface waters obscure what lies beneath the surface of a lake, when consciousness is turbulent through its attachments to sense objects, the Self—the underlying pure awareness—is obscured. Meditation is a means of quieting the mind, just as the stilling of the wind quiets the lake water enabling us to see what lies beneath the surface.

E. *The Upanishads* also emphasize the role of the guru (teacher) in guiding a person into Self-realization. Katha 1.2.9, 1.3.14, Brihad 2.4.1-4. The role of the guru was to assist the student in the mastering of meditation techniques and the removal of obstacles in the pursuit of Self-realization. While the guru is often presented as another person who has gained insight into his own essential nature, the *Upanishads* also present the guru as the Self itself. This is why *the Upanishads* can say that the Self cannot be known unless it reveals itself (Katha, 1.2.23, 2.3.9). In a sense, then, meditation is the Self and the guru is the Self. The Self revealing itself is simply the dissolution of the mind and individual ego.

F. Since the Self is non-duality, Self-realization is the realization of non-duality or oneness, the unitive state. Katha 1.1.17, 1.3.9, 2.1.11, 2.3.12, Brihad 3.22-32, 4.21-30. Hence, the *Upanishads* speak of union (yoga) of the atman and Brahman, or the merging or dissolution of the ego into Brahman. Brihad 2.4.12, 2.4.6., 4.4.1, 4.4.12.