

5 Upanishads

1. Atman = Brahman

1.1 Key Terms

- Atman
 - Your true Self.
 - Not your body, personality, thoughts, or emotions.
 - The deepest “I” that remains the same through all changes (waking, dreaming, deep sleep; childhood, adulthood, old age).
 - Brahman
 - Ultimate reality; the Infinite.
 - The unchanging source, support, and inner essence of everything.
 - Not a personal god in a mythological sense, but the deepest reality of the universe.
 - Central claim of the Upanishads:
Atman = Brahman
 - Your deepest Self is identical with ultimate reality.
 - The same reality that is the “inmost Self” of everything is also your true Self.
 - Famous formula: “You are that.”
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2. Ultimate vs Superficial Reality

2.1 Names and Forms vs Underlying “Stuff”

Upanishadic teaching uses everyday examples:

- Clay / Gold / Iron metaphors
 - If you know what clay is, you in a sense know all clay pots, bowls, statues:
 - * They differ only in name and form.
 - * The underlying stuff is clay.
 - Similarly for gold jewelry or iron tools:
 - * Superficial reality: ring vs necklace vs bracelet (different shapes, purposes, social meanings).

- * Ultimate reality: all are just gold (same substance).

Lesson:

Most differences we focus on (shape, role, label, function) are superficial.

What really matters metaphysically is the underlying reality.

2.2 Applying This to Ourselves and the World

- Superficial reality (appearance):
 - Individual persons, animals, trees, rivers, planets.
 - Social roles: student, parent, boss, stranger.
 - Psychological features: likes, dislikes, memories, moods.
 - All these are “names and forms,” constantly changing.
- Ultimate reality (what they really are):
 - All beings share a single inner essence: Brahman, the Self of all.
 - Our apparent separateness is like:
 - * Different clay pots made of one clay.
 - * Many rivers that merge into one sea.
 - * Drops of honey from many flowers blended into one.

Claim:

If you see only names and forms, you see the world superficially.

To see ultimately is to recognize that the same Self, Brahman, is present in all.

3. Two Metaphors for Atman = Brahman: Ocean vs Actor

The same equality “Atman = Brahman” can be understood in two different ways, using two metaphors. These correspond to two kinds of identity.

3.1 Two Kinds of Identity

- Quantitative (numerical) identity
 - “A = B” means they are literally one and the same thing, just under different descriptions.
 - Example: “Clark Kent = Superman” – there is only one person.
- Qualitative identity
 - Two things are exactly alike in qualities but are still two things.
 - Example: two identical phones from the same factory.

3.2 The Ocean Metaphor (Quantitative Identity)

- Picture:
 - Many waves on the surface of the ocean.
 - Each wave looks separate and has its own size, shape, “life story.”
 - But every wave is just the ocean in a temporary form.
- Applied to Atman = Brahman:

- Each individual self (Atman) is like a wave.
- Brahman is like the ocean itself.
- Deep truth: there is only one reality (ocean); the many selves are not truly separate.
- When you realize this, you stop thinking of yourself as a separate “little self” and identify with the whole.
- Type of identity: quantitative
 - There is only one Self, appearing as many.

3.3 The Actor Metaphor (Qualitative Identity)

- Picture:
 - One actor plays many roles: doctor, villain, lover, king.
 - The characters are really distinct from each other (different backstories, personalities).
 - But they are all expressions of the same underlying actor.
- Applied to Atman = Brahman:
 - Brahman is like the actor.
 - Individual persons are like the roles.
 - Each person is a genuinely distinct center of consciousness, but:
 - * They all share the same fundamental nature or essence.
 - * Each Atman is of the same kind as Brahman, even if not numerically the same “individual.”
- Type of identity: qualitative
 - Each Atman shares the same fundamental properties as Brahman (infinite, pure consciousness, etc.), but there may be many such centers.

3.4 Why This Matters

- Ocean view:
 - Strong monism: only one real Self.
 - Individuality is an illusion or a superficial appearance.
 - Ethics: can support radical compassion—harming others is harming “yourself” (the same Self).
- Actor view:
 - Many real individuals, all with a divine nature.
 - You and others are different, but all equally manifestations of the same infinite reality.
 - Ethics: respect every person as a “role” of the same ultimate actor.

On an exam, be ready to:

- Define qualitative vs quantitative identity.
- Explain how ocean = quantitative, actor = qualitative.
- Connect these to different ways of understanding “Atman = Brahman.”

4. Experiencing the Atman = Brahman Worldview

4.1 “Trying on” the Worldview

If you move through your day as if Atman = Brahman were true:

- Self-perception:
 - You are not just “this body, this ego, this resume.”
 - You identify with the deeper consciousness witnessing all your experiences.
 - View of others:
 - Every person (even enemies, strangers, annoying people) shares the same inner Self.
 - Treat others as “you in another form” (ocean) or as fellow roles played by the same ultimate actor.
 - Emotions and fears:
 - Less fear of death: the body dies, but the Self is like the “life of the tree” that leaves the branch yet does not die.
 - Less anxiety about status, praise, blame: these affect only the “role,” not the underlying actor.
 - Connection with the world:
 - You see continuity between yourself and nature: trees, rivers, animals are expressions of the same reality.
 - Everyday changes become like different waves on one ocean.
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5. Why Believe Atman = Brahman?

5.1 Testimony of the Enlightened

- Upanishads appeal to the testimony of people who claim to have:
 - Deep realization of the Self through meditation and spiritual discipline.
 - Direct experience that the individual self and the universal Self are one or of the same nature.
- Pattern:
 - Like someone who has visited a distant country telling you what it’s like.
 - You haven’t been there; you rely on credible witnesses.
 - Similarly, enlightenment reports are treated as “expert testimony” about a kind of experience most people lack.

5.2 Empirical Testability

- In principle, the claim is empirical in a broad sense:
 - It’s about what can be directly experienced in a transformed state of consciousness.
 - It’s not just a logical truth or a mere definition.
- But:
 - Not testable with current standard scientific methods (e.g., lab experiments, surveys).
 - Access seems to require special inner practices (meditation, ethical discipline, etc.).

5.3 Practical Epistemic Situation

- You must decide how to live under ignorance and uncertainty:
 - You cannot prove the Atman = Brahman doctrine in advance.
 - But you also cannot conclusively disprove it.
- Upanishadic suggestion:
 - Consider the possible benefits if it is true (deep joy, freedom from fear).

- Try practices like meditation on a small scale to see whether they:
 - * Reduce suffering,
 - * Increase peace and insight, even short term.
 - Use these “trial results” as partial evidence when deciding how much to commit.
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6. The Path of Pleasure vs The Path of Joy

6.1 Two Ways of Living

- Path of Pleasure:
 - Main aim: maximize pleasant experiences and minimize unpleasant ones.
 - Focus on external goods:
 - * Sense pleasures (food, sex, comfort).
 - * Social pleasures (praise, admiration, status).
 - * Material pleasures (money, possessions).
- Path of Joy:
 - Main aim: realize the Self and attain abiding inner joy.
 - Focus on:
 - * Knowledge of the Infinite (Brahman).
 - * Inner transformation through meditation, reflection, and discipline.
 - * Detachment from dependence on external conditions.

The Upanishadic message:

To chase pleasure is, unavoidably, to chase pain.

Joy offers a fundamentally different alternative.

6.2 Why Pleasure and Pain Go Together (Two Reasons)

1. Dependence on External, Changing Things
 - Pleasure depends on specific objects and circumstances:
 - Tasty food, a comfortable body, friendly treatment, success.
 - These are:
 - Unstable (aging, loss, illness, failure, others' choices).
 - Outside your full control.
 - When:
 - You don't get what you want → frustration, disappointment.
 - You lose what you enjoy → grief, anxiety.
 - Result: building your life on pleasure is like building on shifting sand.
2. Craving, Habituation, and Contrast
 - Pleasure tends to:
 - Create craving for more: what was once enough stops satisfying.
 - Lead to habituation: over time, the same stimulus produces less pleasure.
 - Change your baseline: after intense pleasures, ordinary life feels dull or painful by comparison.
 - Thus:
 - You need ever-greater stimulation just to feel “okay.”
 - Neutral or mildly pleasant states can feel like deprivation.

Conclusion:

Pursuing more pleasure usually increases instability, craving, and vulnerability to pain.

6.3 Nature of Joy

- Source:
 - Internal: arises from realizing your true Self and its relation to Brahman.
 - Not tied to specific external outcomes; it can persist through success and failure.
- Direction:
 - Undirected:
 - * Not “I’m joyful about getting X.”
 - * More like a background radiance or peace that doesn’t need a particular reason or object.
- Feel:
 - Intense and peaceful at the same time:
 - * Not frantic excitement or adrenaline rush.
 - * Deep fulfillment and stillness.
- Value comparison:
 - Joy is “billions to the pennies of pleasure”:
 - * Even small amounts of true joy vastly outweigh large amounts of ordinary pleasure.
 - * The quality of experience is categorically different, not just a bit better.

6.4 Lasting Joy: How to Move Toward It

Upanishadic strategy involves at least two central components:

1. Shift Your Aim from Pleasure to Joy
 - Intellectually:
 - Recognize the built-in link between pleasure and pain.
 - See that chasing pleasure cannot deliver what you ultimately want: secure, lasting fulfillment.
 - Practically:
 - Loosen attachment to pleasure as your main life goal.
 - Accept some short-term discomfort (e.g., discipline, restraint) for deeper long-term well-being.
2. Cultivate Knowledge of the Self (Atman) and the Infinite (Brahman)
 - Practices:
 - Meditation and inward attention: learning to rest in awareness itself, not in passing thoughts and sensations.
 - Ethical discipline: reducing greed, hatred, and selfishness, which cloud perception of the Self.
 - Reflective inquiry: “Who or what am I really?”, distinguishing the witnessing Self from body and mind.
 - Aim:
 - To move from merely hearing about Atman = Brahman to directly realizing it.
 - This realization is said to be the source of abiding joy.

6.5 Infinite vs Finite: Why Joy Outlasts Pleasure

From the Nārada story:

- All ordinary knowledge and accomplishments concern the finite (limited, changing things).
- The sage teaches:
 - Only the Infinite is the source of abiding joy.
 - Finite things cannot provide lasting happiness because they always change.

Thus, according to the Upanishads:

- Path of Pleasure = dedication to the finite: always unstable, ultimately unsatisfying.
 - Path of Joy = dedication to the Infinite (Brahman): the only secure foundation for lasting happiness.
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Summary for Exams

Be able to:

- Define Atman and Brahman, and explain the claim Atman = Brahman.
- Contrast ultimate vs superficial reality using the clay/gold/iron and related metaphors.
- Explain qualitative vs quantitative identity, and link:
 - Ocean metaphor → quantitative identity (one Self, many apparent forms).
 - Actor metaphor → qualitative identity (many individuals sharing the same divine nature).
- Describe the path of pleasure vs the path of joy, including:
 - Two reasons pleasure is tied to pain.
 - Key features of joy (internal, undirected, intense and peaceful).
 - Why joy is “billions to the pennies of pleasure.”
 - The main elements in moving from pleasure-seeking to joy (shift of aim + realization of the Self).