

5 Upanishads

The Upanishads – Exam Notes

1. Atman = Brahman & Ultimate vs Superficial Reality

Key Questions

- What is your real Self (Atman)?
- What is the nature of ultimate reality (Brahman)?
- Central claim: Atman = Brahman.

Key Terms

- Atman: your innermost Self; what you really are beyond body, thoughts, and personality.
- Brahman: ultimate reality; infinite, unchanging Being that is the source and support of everything.

Ultimate vs Superficial Reality

The Upanishads distinguish:

1. Superficial (apparent) reality
 - The world of “name and form”: particular objects and people, changing and many.
 - Example: clay pots look different (bowls, plates, statues), but differ only in name and shape.
2. Ultimate reality
 - The underlying “stuff” or essence that everything is made from.
 - Examples from Shvetaketu’s father:
 - Knowing one lump of clay lets you “know” all clay objects: they are all just clay in different forms.
 - Likewise with gold and iron.
 - Lesson: beneath many changing forms, there is one underlying reality.

The Upanishadic radical move: - The underlying reality of the entire cosmos (Brahman) is also the underlying reality of you (Atman). - Repeated teaching: “You are that” – your deepest Self is that infinite Being.

Illustrative Images from the Readings

These images support the Atman/Brahman view:

- Dreamless sleep: when in deep sleep with no dreams, you are not aware of body or world; the mind “rests in the Self.” Suggests your real Self is deeper than waking thoughts and roles.
- The tree and the Self: if the Self leaves branch by branch, the tree withers; when the Self leaves completely, the tree dies. The Self is life-giving, but itself does not die.
- The tiny seed: you break the tiny seed and see “nothing,” yet from it a huge tree grows. Suggests an invisible essence from which the visible world arises.
- Salt in water: you can’t see the salt, but the water tastes salty everywhere. Likewise, the Self is invisible but everywhere present in all beings.
- Honey from many flowers: individual nectars lose their separateness in the honey; creatures, though they appear many, have one underlying Self.
- Rivers into the sea: rivers lose their names once merged into the ocean; beings lose their apparent separateness when seen at the level of pure Being.

Conclusion:

Superficial reality = many separate beings and objects.

Ultimate reality = one infinite Self/Being.

The claim Atman = Brahman ties these together: your true Self just is that ultimate reality.

2. Two Interpretations of “Atman = Brahman”

Ocean Metaphor vs Actor Metaphor (Qualitative vs Quantitative Identity)

The statement “Atman = Brahman” can be understood in two different ways, illustrated by two metaphors.

A. Qualitative Identity – The Ocean Metaphor

Qualitative identity: A and B are exactly the same in kind or nature, but are still numerically distinct individuals.

Ocean / wave idea: - Think of the ocean and its waves: - Each wave is made of the same water. - Waves differ in shape, size, and position, but all share the same underlying nature. - Applied to Atman and Brahman: - Brahman is like the ocean. - Individual selves (Atmans) are like waves. - Each Atman shares the same essence as Brahman (infinite Being), but you and I remain distinct individuals.

On this interpretation: - Atman = Brahman means: your innermost nature is of the same kind as ultimate reality. - There are still many selves, all fundamentally of the same type as Brahman.

B. Quantitative (Numerical) Identity – The Actor Metaphor

Quantitative (numerical) identity: A and B are not just similar; they are literally one and the same individual, seen in different guises.

Actor / roles idea: - One actor plays many characters in a play. - The roles look and act differently, but at the deepest level they are all the same person. - Applied to Atman and Brahman: - Brahman is like the single actor. - Individual persons (you, me, others) are like different roles. - There is really just one Self behind all appearances.

On this interpretation: - Atman = Brahman means: there is literally only one Self; your true Self and the true Self in everyone else are numerically identical. - Apparent individuality is like costumes or roles; ultimately, there is just one Experiencer.

Why This Distinction Matters

- Ethics and compassion:
 - Ocean view: others are “made of the same stuff” as you; strong basis for empathy.
 - Actor view: harming another is literally harming yourself, since there is only one Self.
 - Death and fear:
 - Ocean view: your individual wave disappears, but the water (the common essence) remains.
 - Actor view: the “role” ends, but the actor (the one Self) never dies.
 - Exam tip:
 - Ocean metaphor → qualitative identity (same nature, many individuals).
 - Actor metaphor → quantitative identity (one single Self appearing as many).
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3. “Trying On” the Upanishadic Worldview

How might life feel if you really accepted that Atman = Brahman?

Practical Mental Shifts

- Seeing others:
 - You see every person and creature as expressions of the same Self.
 - Likely effects: increased compassion, less dehumanization, reduced anger and resentment.
- Relating to your own life story:
 - Your roles (student, child, friend, etc.) are like characters you temporarily “play.”
 - Your real identity is deeper: the unchanging witness of experiences.
 - Failures, successes, and status become less central to your sense of worth.
- Attitude toward death:
 - Death looks less like annihilation and more like:
 - * a wave returning to the ocean, or
 - * a role ending while the actor remains.
 - This can reduce fear and anxiety about mortality.
- Attachment to external events:
 - If your deepest Self is infinite Being, your happiness doesn’t wholly depend on grades, income, praise, etc.
 - You might feel more stable and secure, less emotionally whipsawed by daily ups and downs.

- Inner experience:
 - Meditation and reflection aim to help you:
 - * Notice the quiet, observing Self behind thoughts and emotions.
 - * Taste moments where the sense of “I vs world” softens.
 - The tradition claims this can grow into a stable realization of unity and peace.
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4. Why Believe “Atman = Brahman”?

Testimony, Unity, and Limits of Evidence

4.1 Testimony of Enlightened People

- Many meditators and mystics (in the Upanishadic tradition and beyond) report:
 - Experiencing a profound unity with all things.
 - A sense that the usual ego is not the real Self.
 - A state of abiding joy and loss of fear of death.
- The Upanishads treat these reports as evidence:
 - Those who deeply practice meditation and spiritual discipline independently converge on similar insights.
 - Their lives (peacefulness, compassion) are presented as further support.

As a student, you might: - Treat this as defeasible but non-zero evidence—a reason to take the view seriously, even if it’s not conclusive.

4.2 Conceptual Motivation

The metaphors (clay, gold, honey, rivers, seed, salt) suggest: - A drive toward explanatory unity: instead of many separate ultimate realities, there is one underlying Being. - This single Being explains: - the origin of all things, - the continuity of life and consciousness, - the similarity of experience across individuals.

4.3 Empirical Testability and Uncertainty

- In principle, the claim “your true Self is identical with ultimate reality” is about reality, not just language, so it is empirical in spirit.
- But:
 - Current scientific methods focus on publicly observable, measurable phenomena.
 - The core evidence for Atman = Brahman is first-person experience reached through deep meditation—something not easily accessed or measured in labs today.

Therefore: - The claim is not decisively testable now by standard methods. - You face a decision under uncertainty: - How much weight to give to ancient testimony? - How much to trust your own future potential experiences?

A practical approach suggested by the lecture: - You must choose what to devote your life to without full information. - In the meantime, you can: - Try meditation yourself, and - See whether it improves your condition (calmer, less anxious, more focused) in the short term. - This doesn’t prove Atman = Brahman, but it can give partial, pragmatic evidence that something in this path is valuable.

5. The Path of Pleasure vs the Path of Joy

The Upanishads (and the lecture) contrast two life strategies:

1. The path of pleasure (preya)
2. The path of joy (shreya), connected to realizing the Self/Brahman

5.1 The Path of Pleasure

Definition: - Pursuing experiences that feel good: sensory enjoyment, praise, success, comfort, entertainment, etc.

Key features: - Caused by external objects or circumstances: - Food, sex, wealth, status, recognition, favorable conditions. - Always tied to its opposite—pain: - “To pursue pleasure is to also pursue pain.”

Two reasons pleasure and pain go together:

1. Dependence on changing circumstances
 - External things are unreliable and impermanent:
 - You may not get what you want → frustration, disappointment.
 - You may lose what you have → grief, fear, anxiety.
 - The more you stake your happiness on externals, the more vulnerable you are.
2. Craving, contrast, and adaptation
 - Pleasures require contrast: you feel them when things get better than before.
 - Over time you adapt (hedonic adaptation):
 - The same enjoyable thing stops feeling special.
 - You need more or new kinds of pleasure to get the same feeling.
 - This creates ongoing craving, restlessness, and dissatisfaction.
 - Even while enjoying pleasure, you may feel:
 - Fear of losing it,
 - Urge for more,
 - Emptiness once it ends.

Overall: - The path of pleasure produces brief highs mixed with: - anxiety, - disappointment, - and eventual emptiness.

5.2 The Path of Joy

Definition: - Focusing on a deep, stable, inner happiness that does not depend on particular external circumstances. - In the Upanishadic framework, this joy comes from realizing Atman = Brahman.

Key features of joy (as presented in lecture):

- Internal source:
 - Joy arises from the state of your Self, not from obtaining or keeping external things.
 - It is linked to inner realization and a quieted mind.
- Undirected:

- Not “I’m happy because I got X.”
- More like a background radiance or peace that doesn’t point to a specific object.
- A general sense of rightness and fullness.
- Intense and peaceful at the same time:
 - Unlike excitement or thrill (which are agitated), this joy is:
 - * very powerful, yet
 - * deeply calm and serene.
- “Billions to the pennies of pleasure”:
 - Analogy: ordinary pleasures are like a few pennies.
 - Joy from realizing the Self is like possessing billions—of a different order of magnitude.
 - Suggests:
 - * greater depth,
 - * greater stability,
 - * and incomparably more value.

The Upanishadic idea: - Only contact with the Infinite (Brahman) yields abiding joy; finite things give only fleeting pleasure.

5.3 How to Achieve Lasting Joy (1) and (2)

The lecture highlights two broad steps:

1. Reorient your life’s aim
 - Shift your primary goal from:
 - “Maximize pleasures / minimize pains”
 - To:
 - “Realize my true Self; seek the Infinite; follow the path of joy.”
 - This includes:
 - Recognizing the limitations of pleasure.
 - Deciding to place ultimate value on inner transformation, wisdom, and connection with Brahman.
2. Adopt a spiritual discipline aimed at Self-realization
 - In the Upanishadic context, this involves:
 - Meditation: training attention, quieting the mind, observing the Self behind thoughts.
 - Study and reflection: contemplating teachings like “You are that,” and the metaphors of unity.
 - Ethical living: reducing selfishness and cruelty, which disturb the mind and reinforce ego.
 - Guidance from a teacher: as with Shvetaketu and Narada, who both seek and receive teachings that point beyond ordinary knowledge.

These practices are supposed to: - Weaken identification with the ego and roles. - Reveal the underlying Self common to all. - Allow the path of joy to gradually replace the compulsive chase after pleasure.

5.4 Are These Claims Testable? How to Decide Under Uncertainty

- The claim that this path leads to lasting joy is, in principle, about how human minds and reality actually are—so empirical in a broad sense.

- But:
 - It involves inner states reached through long practice.
 - Not straightforwardly testable by current scientific methods.

You must: - Make life decisions (how much to prioritize pleasure vs inner growth) from a position of ignorance and uncertainty. - Weigh: - Testimony from the tradition (enlightened people report lasting joy), - Philosophical appeal (a joy not hostage to circumstances), - Your own experiences.

A reasonable interim strategy: - Treat this as a hypothesis. - Run small experiments: - Try meditation. - Reduce some pleasure-chasing behaviors. - Observe whether this brings more peace, clarity, and well-being even in the short term. - Use those results to inform your longer-term choice between a life centered on pleasure vs joy.

Core exam takeaway:

- Atman = Brahman: your deepest Self is the same as ultimate reality.
- Ocean vs actor metaphors illustrate two kinds of identity:
 - Ocean (waves): qualitative identity (same nature, many individuals).
 - Actor (roles): quantitative identity (one Self, many appearances).
- Ultimate vs superficial reality: behind many changing “names and forms” lies one unchanging Being/Self.
- Path of pleasure: externally caused, unstable, and intertwined with pain.
- Path of joy: inner, undirected, intensely peaceful happiness grounded in Self-realization—“billions to the pennies of pleasure”—pursued through reorienting life’s aim and spiritual discipline, under conditions of uncertainty.