

## Selections from the Upaniṣads

*The Upaniṣads are part of the corpus of Indic literature called the Vedas. Vedic literature begins with the collections (saṃhitās) of hymns of the Āryas, an Indo-European people who invaded what is now northwest India beginning in the second millennium BCE, and concludes with the Upaniṣads, or “secret teachings,” composed over a long period beginning in the first millennium BCE. Departing from the formal ritualism of earlier Vedic literature, the Upaniṣads introduce ideas that will become perennial themes in Indian religions, among them speculations about the nature of ultimate reality and our relationship to it and the means to emancipation from what they describe as an endless cycle of birth and death.*

*The Bṛhadāraṇyaka (BH) and Chāndogya (CH) Upaniṣads, quoted here, are perhaps the earliest of these texts. If, as modern scholars now believe, they were composed in the seventh or sixth centuries BCE, they predate the Buddha. The passages below introduce three of the main themes of Upaniṣadic literature: (1) the relationship between brahman, the fundamental reality underlying all phenomenal existence, and ātman, the individual Self, the unchanging Inner Controller in each of us that is part and parcel with brahman, (2) the role of “action” (karma) in the determination of a person’s fate, and (3) the renunciation of desire and development of the knowledge of brahman as the way to liberation. While there is no direct evidence that the Buddha’s teaching of anātman, or “no-Self,” arose in response to these texts, it appears at least reasonable to assume that it did.*

In the beginning this world was only *brahman*, and it knew only itself (*ātman*), thinking: “I am *brahman*. As a result, it became the Whole. Among the gods, likewise, whosoever realized this, only they became the Whole. It was the same also among the seers and among humans. Upon seeing this very point, the seer Vāmadeva proclaimed: “I was Manu, and I was the sun.” This is true even now. If a man knows “I am *brahman*” in this way, he becomes this whole world. Not even the gods are able to prevent it, for he becomes their very self (*ātman*). So when a man venerates another deity, thinking, “He is one, and I am another,” he does not understand. [BH 1.4.10]

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“Yājñavalkya,” Ārtaḥbhaḡa said again, “tell me — when a man has died, and his speech disappears into fire, his breath into the wind, his sight into the sun, his mind into the moon, his hearing into the quarters, his physical body into the earth, his self (*ātman*) into space, the hair of his body into plants, the hair of his head into trees, and his blood and semen into water — what then happens to that person?” Yājñavalkya replied: “My friend, we cannot talk about this in public. Take my hand, Ārtaḥbhaḡa; let’s go and discuss this in private.”

So they left and talked about it. And what did they talk about? — they talked about nothing but action. And what did they praise? — they praised nothing but action. Yājñavalkya told him: “A man turn into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action.” [BH 3.2.13]

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Clearly, this self is *brahman* — this self that is made of perception, made of mind, made of sight, made of breath, made of hearing, made of earth, made of water, made of wind, made of space, made of light and the lightless, made of desire and the desireless, made of anger and the angerless, made of the righteous and the unrighteous; this self that is made of everything. Hence there is this saying: ‘He’s made of this. He’s made of that.’ What a man turns out to be depends on how he acts and on how he conducts himself. If his actions are good, he will turn into something good. If his actions are bad, he will turn into something bad. A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action. And so people say: ‘A person here consists simply of desire.’ A man resolves in accordance with his desire, acts in accordance with his resolve, and turns out to be in accordance with his action. On this point there is the following verse:

A man who’s attached goes with his action,  
to that very place to which his mind and character cling.  
Reaching the end of his action, of whatever he has done in this world —  
From that world he returns back to this world, back to action.

That is the course of a man who desires.

Now, a man who does not desire — who is without desires, who is freed from desires, whose desires are fulfilled, whose only desire is his self — his vital functions (*prāṇa*) do not depart. *Brahman* he is, and to *brahman* he goes. On this point there is the following verse:

When they are all banished,  
those desires lurking in one’s heart;  
Then a mortal becomes immortal,  
and attains *brahman* in this world. [BH 4.4.5]

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This immense, unborn self is none other than the one consisting of perception here among the vital functions (*prāṇa*). There, in that space within the heart, he lies — the controller of all, the lord of all, the ruler of all! He does not become more by good actions or in any way less by bad actions. He is the lord of all! He is the ruler of creatures! He is the guardian of creatures! He is the dike separating these worlds so they would not mingle with each other. It is he that

Brahmins seek to know by means of Vedic recitation, sacrifice, gift-giving, austerity, and fasting. It is he, on knowing whom a man becomes a sage. It is when they desire him as their world that wandering ascetics undertake the ascetic life of wandering.

It was when they knew this that men of old did not desire offspring, reasoning: ‘Ours is this self, and it is our world. What then is the use of offspring for us?’ So they gave up the desire for sons, the desire for wealth, and the desire for worlds, and undertook the mendicant life. The desire for sons, after all, is the same as the desire for wealth, and the desire for wealth is the same as the desire for worlds — both are simply desires.

About this self (*ātman*), one can only say ‘not [this] , not [that].’ He is ungraspable, for he cannot be grasped. He is undecaying, for he is not subject to decay. He has nothing sticking to him, for he does not stick to anything. He is not bound; yet he neither trembles in fear nor suffers injury.”

These two thoughts do not pass across this self at all: ‘Therefore, I did something bad’; and ‘Therefore, I did something good.’ This self, on the other hand, passes across both those; he is not burnt by anything that he has done or left undone.

The same point is made by this R̥gvedic verse:

He is a *brahman* eternal greatness —  
he’s not made greater or smaller by action.  
It’s his trail that one should get to know;  
And when a man knows him,  
he’s no longer stained by bad deeds.

A man who knows this, therefore, becomes calm, composed, cool, patient, and collected. He sees the self (*ātman*) in just himself (*ātman*) and all things as the self. Evil does not pass across him, and he passes across all evil. He is not burnt by evil; he burns up all evil. He becomes a Brahmin — free from evil, free from stain, free from doubt.

Now, this is the immense and unborn self, the eater of food and the giver of wealth. A man who knows this finds wealth. And this is the immense and unborn self, unaging, undying, immortal, free from fear — the *brahman*. *Brahman*, surely, is free from fear, and a man who knows this undoubtedly becomes *brahman* that is free from fear. [BH 4.4.22–25]

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Now, far above here the light that shines from heaven on the backs of everything, on the backs of all things, in the very highest of the high worlds— it is clearly this very same light here within a man. [CH 3.13.7]

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*Brahman*, you see, is this whole world. With inner tranquility, one should venerate it as *jalān*.

Now, then, man is undoubtedly made of resolve. What a man becomes on departing from here after death is in accordance with his resolve in this world. So he should make this resolve:

“This self (*ātman*) of mine that lies deep within my heart — it is made of mind; the vital functions (*prāṇa*) are its physical form; luminous is its appearance; the real is its intention; space is its essence (*ātman*), it contains all actions, all desires, all smells, and all tastes; it has captured this whole world; it neither speaks nor pays any heed.

“This self (*ātman*) of mine that lies deep within my heart — it is smaller than a grain of rice or barley, smaller than a mustard seed, smaller even than a millet grain or a millet kernel; but it is larger than the earth, larger than the intermediate region, larger than the sky, larger even than all these worlds put together.

“This self (*ātman*) of mine that lies deep within my heart — it contains all actions, all desires, all smells, and all tastes; it has captured this whole world; it neither speaks nor pays any heed.

“It is *brahman*. On departing from here after death, I will become that.”

A man who has this resolve is never beset at all with doubts. This is what Śāṇḍilya used to say. [CH 3.14.1–4]

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The finest essence here — that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*ātman*). And that’s how *you* are, Śvetaketu.” [CH 6.8.7]

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“The self (*ātman*) that is free from evils, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst; the self whose desires and intentions are real — that is the self that you should try to discover, that is the self that you should seek to perceive. When someone discovers that self and perceives it, he obtains all the worlds, and all his desires are fulfilled.” So said Prajāpati. [CH 8.7.1]

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When one is fast asleep, totally collected and serene, and sees no dreams — that is the self; that is the immortal; that is the one free from fear; that is *brahman*.” [CH 8.11.1]