

Retreat into the forest: the Upanishads and Brahman

The Self, the self-existent One, pierced the openings of the senses outward; therefore, a man looks out and not in. But a certain wise man, in search of immortality, turned his gaze inward and saw the Self.

-- *Katha Upanishad 2.1.1*

Now what people call “the sacrificial offering” is also really the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge, for only after sacrificing with the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge does a man find the Self.

-- *Chandogya Upanishad 8.5.1*

IN THIS CLASS we will be learning about the time of the Upanishads, a period of intense spiritual exploration characterized by the rejection of Vedic ritualism with its constraints of caste and social duty. During this time seekers retreated from society into a life of asceticism in the forest, seeking teachers and practices that could unfold an experience of *brahman*, the foundational matrix of being believed to underlie all phenomenal existence. A key Upanishadic teaching is that *brahman* is to be found within each individual as the essence of inner self, or *atman*. We could approximate this teaching in contemporary English by the equation *Self = self*.

REQUIRED ASSIGNMENTS:

READ “The Teachings of the Upanishads” by William Mahoney: A contemporary American scholar/practitioner describes the scriptures and worldview of the Upanishads.

READ “How Do We Experience the Inner Self?” by Sally Kempton: A former Hindu swami and regular contributor to *Yoga Journal* describes the Self in contemporary language.

GO FOR A LONG WALK BY YOURSELF in the redwoods or by the ocean. Observe the effect on your mind and body of being quiet and open to the natural world. Think about what it might mean to retreat from the demands of daily life and spend some time seeking an experience of deeper wisdom or truth.

OPTIONAL:

Try doing some of Sally Kempton’s meditation exercises.

READ this excerpt from the *Chandogya Upanishad*, in which a father is teaching his young son (experientially!) about the nature of the Self.