

Upanishadic passages on death, rebirth, and karma

Debate between Jāratkārava-ārtabhāga and Yājñavalkya in the court of Janaka, king of the Videhas

11. 'Yājñavalkya,' he said, 'when such a person (a sage) dies, do the vital breaths (prānas) move out of him or no?'

'No,' replied Yājñavalkya; 'they are gathered up in him, he swells, he is inflated, and thus inflated the dead lies at rest.'

12. 'Yājñavalkya,' he said, 'when such a man dies, what does not leave him?'

'The name,' he replied; 'for the name is endless, the Visvedevas are endless, and by it he gains the endless world.'

13. 'Yājñavalkya,' he said, 'when the speech of this dead person enters into the fire, breath into the air, the eye into the sun, the mind into the moon, the hearing into space, into the earth the body, into the ether the self, into the shrubs the hairs of the body, into the trees the hairs of the head, when the blood and the seed are deposited in the water, where is then that person?'

Yājñavalkya said: 'Take my hand, my friend. We two alone shall know of this; let this question of ours not be (discussed) in public.' Then these two went out and argued, and what they said was karman (work), what they praised was karman, viz. that a man becomes good by good work, and bad by bad work. After that Gāratkārava Ārtabhāga held his peace.

Debate between Yājñavalkya and Janaka, king of the Videhas

35. 'Now as a heavy-laden carriage moves along groaning, thus does this corporeal Self, mounted by the intelligent Self, move along groaning, when a man is thus going to expire.

36. 'And when (the body) grows weak through old age, or becomes weak through illness, at that time that person, after separating himself from his

members, as an Amra (mango), or Udumbara (fig), or Pippala-fruit is separated from the stalk, hastens back again as he came, to the place from which he started, to (new) life.

37. 'And as policemen, magistrates, equerries, and governors wait for a king who is coming back, with food and drink, saying, "He comes back, he approaches," thus do all the elements wait on him who knows this, saying, "That Brahman comes, that Brahman approaches."

38. 'And as policemen, magistrates, equerries, and governors gather round a king who is departing, thus do all the senses (prānas) gather round the Self at the time of death, when a man is thus going to expire.'

1. Yājñavalkya continued: 'Now when that Self, having sunk into weakness, sinks, as it were, into unconsciousness, then gather those senses (prānas) around him, and he, taking with him those elements of light, descends into the heart. When that person in the eye turns away, then he ceases to know any forms.

2. "He has become one," they say, "he does not see." "He has become one," they say, "he does not smell." "He has become one," they say, "he does not taste." "He has become one," they say, "he does not speak." "He has become one," they say, "he does not hear." "He has become one," they say, "he does not think." "He has become one," they say, "he does not touch." "He has become one," they say, "he does not know." The point of his heart becomes lighted up, and by that light the Self departs, either through the eye, or through the skull, or through other places of the body. And when he thus departs, life (the chief prāna) departs after him, and when life thus departs, all the other vital spirits (prānas) depart after it. He is conscious, and being conscious he follows and departs.

'Then both his knowledge and his work take hold of him, and his acquaintance with former things.'

3. 'And as a caterpillar, after having reached the end of a blade of grass, and after having made another approach (to another blade), draws itself together towards it, thus does this Self, after having thrown off this body and dispelled all ignorance, and after making another approach (to another body), draw himself together towards it.

4. And as a goldsmith, taking a piece of gold, turns it into another, newer and more beautiful shape, so does this Self, after having thrown off this body and dispelled all ignorance, make unto himself another, newer and more beautiful shape, whether it be like the Fathers, or like the Gandharvas, or like the Devas, or like Pragāpati, or like Brahman, or like other beings.

5. 'That Self is indeed Brahman, consisting of knowledge, mind, life, sight, hearing, earth, water, wind, ether, light and no light, desire and no desire, anger and no anger, right or wrong, and all things. Now as a man is like

this or like that, according as he acts and according as he behaves, so will he be:—**a man of good acts will become good, a man of bad acts, bad. He becomes pure by pure deeds, bad by bad deeds.**

‘And here they say that a person consists of desires. And as is his desire, so is his will; and as is his will, so is his deed; and whatever deed he does, that he will reap.

6. ‘And here there is this verse: “To whatever object a man's own mind is attached, to that he goes strenuously together with his deed; and having obtained the end (the last results) of whatever deed he does here on earth, he returns again from that world (which is the temporary reward of his deed) to this world of action.”

*tad yad etad idaṃmayo ‘domaya iti | yathākārī yathācārī tathā
bhavati | sādhuḥkārī sādhuḥ bhavati | pāpakārī pāpo bhavati |
puṇyaḥ puṇyena karmaṇā pāpaḥ pāpena | atho khalv āhuḥ |
kāmaṃmaya evāyaṃ puruṣa iti | sa yathākāmo bhavati tatkratur
bhavati | yatkratur bhavati tat karma kurute | yat karma kurute
tad abhisampadyate || BrhUp_4,4.5 ||*

‘So much for the man who desires. But as to the man who does not desire, who, not desiring, freed from desires, is satisfied in his desires, or desires the Self only, his vital spirits do not depart elsewhere,--being Brahman, he goes to Brahman.

7. ‘On this there is this verse: “When all desires which once entered his heart are undone, then does the mortal become immortal, then he obtains Brahman.

‘And as the slough of a snake lies on an ant-hill, dead and cast away, thus lies this body; but that disembodied immortal spirit (prāna, life) is Brahman only, is only light.’

Śvetaketu Āruneya with Pravāhana Jaivali, the king of the Pañcālas

14. ‘They take him to the fire (the funeral pile), and then the altar-fire is indeed fire, the fuel fuel, the smoke smoke, the light light, the coals coals, the sparks sparks. In that very altar-fire the Devas offer man, and from that oblation man rises, brilliant in colour.

15. ‘Those who thus know this (even Grihasthas), and those who in the forest worship faith and the True (Brahman Hiranyagarbha), go to light (arkis), from light to day, from day to the increasing half, from the increasing half to the six months when the sun goes to the north, from those six months to the world of the Devas (Devaloka), from the world of the Devas to the sun, from the sun to the place of lightning. When they have thus reached the place of lightning a spirit comes near them, and

leads them to the worlds of the (conditioned) Brahman. In these worlds of Brahman they dwell exalted for ages. There is no returning for them.

16. 'But they who conquer the worlds (future states) by means of sacrifice, charity, and austerity, go to smoke, from smoke to night, from night to the decreasing half of the moon, from the decreasing half of the moon to the six months when the sun goes to the south, from these months to the world of the fathers, from the world of the fathers to the moon. Having reached the moon, they become food, and then the Devas feed on them there, as sacrificers feed on Soma, as it increases and decreases. But when this (the result of their good works on earth) ceases, they return again to that ether, from ether to the air, from the air to rain, from rain to the earth. And when they have reached the earth, they become food, they are offered again in the altar-fire, which is man, and thence are born in the fire of woman. Thus they rise up towards the worlds, and go the same round as before.

'Those, however, who know neither of these two paths, become worms, birds, and creeping things.'