

Death, Immortality and Reformation: A Comparative Study of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Hindu Scriptural Texts

Saumitra Chakravarty
VVS College, Bangalore, India

This essay attempts to analyze the principal themes of the Mesopotamian “Epic of Gilgamesh” and compare them with other ancient texts, chiefly the canonical texts of the Hindu scriptures. The focus of comparison remains the introduction of Enkidu as the unspoilt, primeval man, the restorative role he plays in the narrative, and above all, the death-immortality motif which occupies centre-space in the latter half of the epic after his death.

Keywords: death, immortality, transformation, quest, flood, Hindu, body, soul

The Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the earliest known epics of Western civilization. Written in Akkadian in the cuneiform¹ script, its extraordinary character lies in its treatment of certain fundamental issues of human existence—the inevitability of death and man’s eternal quest for immortality. It goes beyond the traditional celebration of human grandeur and heroism in an epic to a realization of the futility of human striving for glory and acclaim in the face of the ephemerality of life.

The epic describes Gilgamesh as a monarch surpassing all others—powerful and tall, violent and splendid, a wild bull of a man, an unvanquished warrior, beloved of his soldiers and yet—a tyrant to his people. His story is that of the arrogance of power, the frenzied expectation of something beyond one’s reach, the inevitability of failure, the lessons one learns from it and the humbling process that comes from failure. Deep friendship, passionate love, and the vulnerability it exposes one to, an over-powering life-force and a journey from the state of “un-sleep” to sleep and death and the craving for immortality arising out of man’s fear of death—Gilgamesh has experienced it all. His confrontation with death begets overpowering grief and paralyzing fear leading to his journey in search of immortality. But neither heroism nor might nor power can grant him the immortality that he seeks to claim through his colossal achievements. Instead, it makes him aware of the futility of man’s search for fame when death snatches all. Therefore, as the poet tells us, he has also suffered all. Gilgamesh’s search is thus much more fundamental in nature than the other Greco-Roman epics of a later period. It is the quest of all humankind. Yet the profundity of the narrative lies in its astonishing simplicity. Unlike the vast panorama of characters and events that traditionally define an epic, *Gilgamesh* has only two main characters and no epic war.

It will be the purpose of this essay to study these fundamental issues of human existence that the epic delves into by analyzing the change that comes over the hero during the course of the narrative. In the process,

Saumitra Chakravarty, Dr., Retd Professor, VVS College, Bangalore, India.

¹ Cuneiform script—It is one of the earliest known forms of writing developed by the ancient Sumerians around 3500 B.C. It consists of wedge-shaped characters pressed into soft clay tablets using a reed stylus.

an attempt at a comparison with other ancient texts will be made, particularly those which throw up similar questions on Life, Death and Immortality such as the Hindu *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The first surviving version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, was compiled in Akkadian² most probably by the scholar-priest Sin-leqi-unninni³ between the 13th and the 10th centuries B.C. from five Sumerian poems⁴. Sinn-leqi-Unninni's text was entitled *Sha-nagba-imuru* ("He Who Saw the Abyss"). The 12 clay tablets containing the text were discovered by Austin Henry Layard from the Library of King Ashurbanipal among the ruins of the royal palace of Nineveh in 1849 and were brought to the British Museum where they were finally deciphered by George Smith, an English Assyriologist in 1872.

In the Sumerian List of Kings⁵ Gilgamesh is mentioned as the fifth King of Erech ruling around 2750 B.C. The text describes him as being two-thirds divine, the son of the goddess Ninsun and the shepherd Lugalbanda who was in turn the son of Shamash the sun god. In this context W. F. Albright claims:

In turning to consider the original nature of Gilgames his solar characteristics become immediately apparent. The hero's adventures in the epic remind one involuntarily of the deeds of Heracles and Samson, whose essentially solar nature is clear...Lugalbanda is the son of the sun-god, who had visited his mother in the guise of a golden shower, he passes his youth as a shepherd before mounting the throne...Like Gilgames and other older gods of productivity, he comes to occupy a prominent position in myth and legend, thanks to the annual celebration of his adventures in mimetic fertility rites. (Albright, 1920, pp. 310-311)

As King Gilgamesh has built the most beautiful city in the world, his city of Erech⁶. The poet describes the city:

Erech, the high-walled where people array them
Gorgeous in festal attire and each day is a revel,
Eunuch-priests clashing their cymbals and dancing-girls
Flown with their wantoning... (Campbell, 2001, Tab I, Col V, 5-6)

A surviving historiographic text called "The Tummal Inscription"⁷ mentions Gilgamesh as a builder of temples⁸

² Akkadian is the earliest documented Semitic language among Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic languages, named after the city of Akkad in Mesopotamia.

³ The first surviving version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, was compiled in Akkadian most probably by the scholar-priest Sin-leqi-unninni between the thirteenth and the 10th centuries B.C. from five Sumerian poems. It was entitled *Sha-nagbeimuru* ("The Man Who Saw the Abyss") and was discovered from the Library of King Ashurbanipal among the ruins of the royal palace of Nineveh in 1849. However, the script could be deciphered only in 1872, even though the surviving 11 Tablets had been brought back to the British Museum a few years before that.

⁴ The five poems include "Gilgamesh and Huwawa", "Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven", "Gilgamesh and Agga of Kish", "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld", "The Death of Gilgamesh". Campbell, in his prologue to this edition, says the origin of the poem with the Sumerians was perhaps the 4th millennium B.C. or even earlier. The tablets found at Ashur were anterior to the date of the tablets now found in the British Museum.

⁵ The Sumerian King List, a quasi-historical document, lists the kings ruling Sumerian cities from Kish to Akkad. It begins with a number of antediluvian kings who ruled before the Flood.

⁶ The city of Erech/Urak was also known as Warkah. It was founded in the fourth millennium B.C. and was situated on the ancient dried up channel of the Euphrates. It played an important role in the early urbanization of Sumer in the mid-fourth millennium B.C. It was also well known for the evolution of writing probably around 3300 B.C.

⁷ The "Tummal Inscription" is of the *Babylonian Chronicles*, listing the names of rulers who built the temples of the divine pair Enlil and Ninlil. That of Enlil was at Nippur and of Ninlil in Tummal. The Chronicle also mentions that Gilgamesh built the Dunumunbura, Enlil's dias and his son made the Tummal splendid and introduced Ninlil there.

⁸ The great Inanna temple which finds many references in the epic refers to the cultic worship of the goddess of sex, fertility, war and justice. She was worshipped in Sumer as Inanna but was known as Ishtar by Babylonians and Akkadians. Inanna/Ishtar was also associated with the Ugaritic Astarte/Ashtoreth mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Her cult was involved with prostitution or "sacred sex" as we find in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

For a second time the Tummal fell into ruin
 Gilgamesh built the
 Numumburra of the House of Enlil,
 Ur-lugal, the son of Gilgamesh,
 Made the Tummal pre-eminent,
 Brought Ninlil to the Tummal. (Sollberger, 1962, pp. 10-14)

An ancient document from Nippur called *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, begins by singing the praises of the hero:

I will sing the song of the man of battle, the man of battle. I will sing the song of lord Gilgamec, the man of battle. I will sing the song of him with the well-proportioned limbs, the man of battle. I will sing the song of the mighty...lord, the man of battle. (A1-A41, n.d.)

But Gilgamesh is also without restraint in his display of power, a “wild bull of a man”; he is unvanquished like an “uncontrolled flood”. Gilgamesh is an epitome of hegemonic masculinity at its extreme. He takes the son away from the father, the girl from her mother. He stamps upon the trembling virgin in her bedchamber on her wedding night the first right to divest her of her maidenhood while the suffering groom humbly waits outside:

Gilgamesh! View him, O look upon his face,
 How comely his manhood
 Dower'd with lustiness is he, the whole of his body with power... (Campbell, 2001, TabI, Col V, 15)

He is like a shepherd who savages his own flock. Of this hegemonic masculinity that Gilgamesh displays, Ilan Pelad lists certain characteristics: “It is dominant and aspires to perpetuate its dominance over women and men of other masculine identities... It requires constant validation. Hegemonic masculinity needs to prove itself usually through aggressiveness, or even violence, towards femininity and subordinate masculinities” (Pelad, 2016, p. 43). Gilgamesh’s Life Force and need for achievement are so overwhelming that he feels no urge for Sleep.

The creation of a counterforce to the unbridled power and tyranny of the epic hero by Father-god Anu changes the course of the narrative. The appearance of Enkidu in the forest introduces us to primeval man in his natural state of innocence, bereft of the corrosive trappings of civilization. He is pitched against Gilgamesh who represents royal male privilege at the apex of the kingdom. Reared and nursed by the beasts of the forest, Enkidu freely roams the wild with them, and like them, drinks from streams and shares their food:

Aye, there was Enkidu also, he whom the mountains had gendered
 E'en with gazelles did he pasture on herbage along with the cattle... (Campbell, 2001, Tab I, Col IV, 2-3)

He is what in Biblical terms may be called pre-lapsarian Man like Adam before the Fall, before tasting the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. The coming of Enkidu tames Gilgamesh, he no longer ravages the maidens of Erech, nor the young men. It curbs his indomitable Life Force and Sleep overcomes him as it doth all men, says the poet. The coming of Enkidu also introduces us the Death-Immortality motif in the narrative.

This wild man finds a parallel in Hindu mythology in the figure of the sage Rsyasrnga (literally, “deer-horned”) mentioned in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Rsyasrnga like Enkidu, dwells in the forest. He lives in the hermitage of his father, the Rishi Vibhandaka. Unlike Enkidu who is shaped from a handful of clay by the goddess Aruru like Adam in the Book of Genesis, Rsyasrnga is born through Vibhandaka’s semen being ejected into the waters of a lake after he spies the heavenly courtesan Urvashi during her aerial flight. As

explained in the Vana Parva of the *Mahabharata* a doe drinks the water, conceives and gives birth to Rsyasringa, the deer-horned sage. Brought up to lead a life of severe austerity and prayer in the seclusion of his father's hermitage the young sage like Enkidu, has no knowledge of the outside world, of other human beings male or female, or of material pleasures and sexual urges:

Rṣyaśṛṅgo vanacaraḥ tapasvī svādhyāya-saṃyuktaḥ
Anabhijñās tu nārīṇāṃ viṣayāṇāṃ sukhasya ca. (Ramayana, 1998, Bala Kanda, p. 31)

Rsyasringa's coming is described in the Indian epic as being a restorative force just as Enkidu's brings about a change in Gilgamesh and the restoration of order in Erech. When the kingdom of Anga is overcome by severe drought as a punishment for the grave sins of its king Romapada, the chief courtesan of the city is sent with her maidens to the forest to lure the deer-horned sage to the kingdom. He is seduced by the younger courtesans singing sweetly and embracing him and offered sweetmeats and gifts:

Vibhāṇḍakasutas tatra tās ca apaśyad varaṅganāḥ
Tāsāṃ veśaṃ ca bhāṣāṃ ca gāyantīnāṃ madhura-svaram. (Ramayana, 1998, Bala Kanda, p. 31)

Rsyasringa is thus entrapped and brought to the kingdom. His coming brings rain and the restoration of fertility to the land. In the *Ramayana*, his story is narrated to King Dasaratha who invites him to the court to conduct the sacrifice that will lead to the birth of Rama and his brothers who will be the destroyer of Evil forces in the Treta Yuga⁹. Similarly in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Shamhat, the priestess of Ishtar's temple at Erech is entrusted with the task of introducing Enkidu into civilization to play out his designated role as one who will tame the mighty tyrant Gilgamesh who ravages maidens and seizes young men. Shamhat is a sacred prostitute¹⁰ variously called "īstaru"/"harimtu" serving at Ishtar's shrine, Ishtar being a goddess of sex and fertility. She introduces the innocent virgin Enkidu to the arts of eroticism. In the process, he loses his primal innocence and his contact with his natural habitat and the trust of his erstwhile animal companions. He is washed and dressed as a human being and taught the arts of the civilized world. Enkidu loses his animal virility and primal innocence and gains human rationality but also awareness of his power:

Enkidu losing his innocence, so when the cattle fled from him.
Failed his knees, and he slacked in his running not as aforetime. (Campbell, 2001, Tab I, Col IV, 23-24)

While the arrival of Enkidu to the court of Gilgamesh gives rise to a passionate friendship which reins in the king's exploitation of his subjects, Rsyasringa symbolizes purity, spiritual power and the relation between ascetic virtue and cosmic harmony. His coming brings back the fertility and prosperity of the land lost through human sin.

Cooper quotes Thorkild Jacobsen by saying:

The key to the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Jacobsen says in the "Oppressor of Uruk", is in the dreams that foretell Enkidu's coming, "Gilgamesh sees an axe, with which he cohabits as with a woman, as the axe is equivalent to

⁹ Hindu mythology believes in the 4 cosmic ages called Yugas in each of which Evil manifests itself in a particular form. Lord Vishnu descends to Earth in one of his ten avatic forms to destroy the forces of Evil and restore justice.

¹⁰ Sacred prostitution or cult prostitution within the temple of Ishtar (as opposed to ordinary prostitution) probably sprang from the ancient fertility ritual of "hierosgamos", the mating of the high priestess of the temple with the king, representing that between the sky god and earth goddess. It finds mention in the Hebrew Bible in the *Books of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel*, where both male and female prostitutes find reference. In India, we find mention of "devadasis" serving in a similar capacity in the temples.

Engidu, the dream cannot mean anything but that homosexual intercourse is going to take place between Gilgamesh and the newcomer.” (Cooper, 2002, p. 73)

Like that of Achilles and Patroklos in the *Iliad*, it is a friendship that goes far beyond intimate friendly ties. Their love for each other is such as no man can ever experience for a woman.

Together the two heroes engage in a series of actions which go beyond Gilgamesh’s earlier acts of exploitation. His present self-aggrandizement and hunt for glory to immortalize his deeds in the face of the transience of life lead him to acts which may be termed sacrilegious at best. His cutting of the sacred cedar trees of the forest and his merciless slaughter of its divinely appointed guardian Humbaba is the first of them. Heedless of the havoc they have caused, Gilgamesh returns with Enkidu to Erech, full of his own glory.

The next such act occurs when the goddess Ishtar (goddess of sex and war) approaches Gilgamesh to be her lover, the great hero who is now washed and dressed in royal robes, looking like a god drunk with conquest. In ancient Mesopotamian society, kings were traditionally wedded to Ishtar, the goddess of sex and fertility in a sacred rite called *hierosgamos* to ensure the land’s yield. This ceremony was ritually conducted every year with the king mating with the priestess of Ishtar’s temple during the Babylonian New Year festivities. Through it they re-enacted Ishtar’s marriage to the shepherd Dumuzi, whom she later cast into the underworld of the dead. Gilgamesh and Enkidu however, blasphemously taunt, insult and humiliate her. In so doing, it may be said that Gilgamesh has rejected a hetero-normative, divine-human sexual relationship in favour of a homosexual one with Enkidu. This is the second act of sacrilege.

The third act of sacrilege occurs when the goddess Ishtar in terrible fury lets loose the Bull of Heaven to bring destruction upon the city of Erech. The Bull in agricultural communities is a symbol of the primal forces of strength, virility and fertility. Any attack against it is a potential denial of these life-giving forces¹¹. Joseph Campbell in *Occidental Mythology* states:

For as in Sumer, so in Crete...the bull was the animal of the moon: the waning and waxing god, by the magic of whose night dew the vegetation is restored; the lord of tides and the productive powers of the earth, the lord of women, lord of the rhythm of the womb. (Campbell, 2001, p. 60)

The ritual slaughter of the bull represents the ever-living, ever-dying shepherd-god Dumuzi-absu, who is also mentioned as Ishtar’s lover in the epic. It represents the annual death-re-birth cycle of Nature.

The Bull symbol recurs in several ancient mythologies including those of the Cretan Minotaur and the sacred Egyptian Apis associated with Osiris. In Hindu myth, it is found in Nandi the sacred mount of the god Siva. In some manifestations of the dancing Siva the god, holding in his right hand the drum-beat of time, holds the fire of the knowledge of immortality on his left palm. Siva emanates flames as do the four legs of the bull, the image depicting the death and re-birth cycle.

In this case however Ishtar’s unleashing of the Bull of Heaven represents divine wrath and vengeance. As such it is a reversal of the fertility symbol and therefore spells potential destruction for Erech, Gilgamesh’s city. The rampaging Bull drains off the water sources of Erech, tramples crops and causes general upheaval and distress to the citizens. Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaughter the Bull and slap its innards on the goddess Ishtar thus further desecrating the sacredness of divinity.

¹¹ Bull symbols recur in the myths of Mesopotamia, Crete in Greece in the story of Theseus, in India in Shiva’s Nandi, in Taurus of the Zodiac sign and in Egypt as Apis the sacred bull.

Each of these actions is an act against Nature and its forces, its cycles of fertilization and procreation. Therefore, these sacrilegious acts of hubris and aggressiveness of these two heroes will not go unpunished. One of them must die and the other suffer even worse punishment, the boundless grief caused by the death of the beloved, thus exposing love's tragic vulnerability even in a mighty hero like Gilgamesh. The choice of Enkidu as victim could be termed a judgement against the betrayal of his roots by the primal man through his acts of cutting down the sacred cedar forest and killing its guardian and also through his slaughter of the sacred Bull.

From Gilgamesh's earlier acceptance of the inevitability of death and the need for glorious achievement in the face of it, the death of Enkidu generates not only overwhelming grief but also paralyzing fear. Roaming the wilderness like a wild man in search of an answer to the mystery of death and the very real fear of the possibility of his own death, he questions:

I too—shall I not die like Enkidu also

Sorrow hath enter'd my heart, I fear death as I range o'er the desert. (Campbell, 2001, Tab IX, Col I, 5-6)

Hope Nash Wolff states:

We cannot know whether the Sumerians and their ancestors pictured Enkidu as half animal, and this nature of his does not change in the epic. Gilgamesh on the other hand does change, for he is severely affected by Enkidu's presence and subsequent loss, and it is the alteration of him, the variety of form it takes and its meaning which is the poem's subject...At this tragedy (Enkidu's death) Gilgamesh loses all his unthinking self satisfaction and becomes a raging, questioning Achilles; and yet he suffers no tragic or glorious end, but returns quietly home, defeated in his demand for a better life. (Wolff, 1969, p. 392)

But is that all there is to the turn of the narrative? Does Gilgamesh really gain nothing through his journey into the Unknown? This essay argues that he returns from his quest, a changed man. His journey brings self knowledge and transformation.

The Death motif in the narrative introduces us to the quest for Immortality, a desire for something that was granted to his ancestor Utnapishtim but remains inaccessible to the mighty and powerful Gilgamesh. Utnapishtim is a survivor of the Flood narrative, like Noah in the Bible and Atrahasis in the Babylonian epic. These Flood narratives were common to all major ancient cultures. In Hindu mythology it is there in the Matsya avatar story¹². In the *Matsya Purana* Lord Vishnu appears in the form of a giant fish to save the virtuous king Manu¹³ and the seven seers and the seeds of life. But unlike Noah, Atrahasis or King Manu, Utnapishtim has been granted the boon of immortality. The others survive the Flood to become the progenitor of the new human race and start the next cosmic cycle.

Gilgamesh on the other hand, plagued by grief and fear of his own mortality, makes a liminal journey to meet his ancestor Utnapishtim. In the process, he is also travelling back in time from his own post-diluvian to Utnapishtim's ante-diluvian space. This is a journey from the land of the living through the Sea of Death to the land of the man who has conquered Death and gained Immortality. It indicates the hero's own psychological and spiritual progression to confront his own mortality and the ultimate boundaries of human existence, beyond which no human however great or glorious, can go.

¹² The story of King Manu and the giant fish first appeared in the *Brahmana Satpata* and thereafter in other Hindu texts including the *Mahabharata*.

¹³ Manu, in Hindu tradition is not a single individual but a title for the progenitor and ruler of a particular era called a Manvantara.

What is this concept of Immortality as seen in the epic? Is it the immortality of the body, as Gilgamesh desires and Utnapishtim the chosen one of the god Ea, has been granted? Is it the conquering of the fear of death thereby overcoming its threat? Is it even the immortality of achievement while the doer must die as Gilgamesh originally aspired for at the beginning of the text:

Who, O my friend, is unconquer'd by death?
A divinity, certes,
...but mortals, their days are all number'd. (Campbell, 2001, Tab III, Col II, 5-7)

...But they will seek "a name by their valour
They will establish." (Campbell, 2001, 90)

Like Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, his hope is that he will live on through his deeds.

Can Gilgamesh achieve any of these? While Utnapishtim lies on the other side of this boundary of Death physically immortal like the gods, Gilgamesh is at least granted a glimpse into what lies beyond death like Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and Aeneas in the *Aeneid*. He comes to realize the futility of it all, the awareness that however great, powerful or glorious he might be, he too must suffer death and decay like Enkidu. He becomes aware of his own mortality. The journey through the Waters of Death, the encounter with Shiduri who tells him that all men must die, that only the gods are immortal and that he must therefore enjoy the simple pleasures of life, humbles him and exposes his search for immortality as a delusion. And finally the meeting with his great ancestor Utnapishtim who dismisses his quest and exposes his inability to perform the simple tests set for him, chastens him and makes him aware of who he really is. Step by step his earlier delusions of grandeur are chipped away; he comes face to face with his true self. The process of transformation has begun. Sri Aurobindo in his *Essays on the Gita*, says: "destruction is the first condition of progress. Inwardly, the man who does not destroy his lower self-formation cannot rise to a greater existence" (Aurobindo, 1989, p. 384).

Hammond says: "Gilgamesh's journey into darkness, an outward representation of an inward process, brings him to a new source of truth, deeper and more profound than anything he has yet experienced... Gilgamesh cannot escape the mortal part of his nature". By identifying himself with Enkidu, he has established his essential kinship with all men and their mortality (Hammond, Jablow, & Brod, 2002, p. 350). Gilgamesh returns a humbled and chastened man, a tyrant turned reformer at the end of the epic.

The suffering that Enkidu's passing brings for Gilgamesh is tied closely in the story to the king's quest for a way to escape his own death. Both were a form of denial, specifically culture's denial of the reality of the wilderness in accepting the inevitability of his own mortality, Gilgamesh by implication accepts the wild man as a part of himself: he re-integrates the second self. (p. 351)

Hinduism offers us a deeper interpretation of the concept of Death and Immortality. Like Gilgamesh travelling through the Waters of Death, the boy Naciketas in the *Katha Upanishad*¹⁴ is offered to Yama the Lord of Death, by his father Vajasravasa in anger at his persistent questioning. Gilgamesh begins his journey maddened with overwhelming emotions which have destroyed his earlier arrogance and delusions of power. The boy Naciketas unlike Gilgamesh, is calm and steadfast in his faith, disciplined and unshakeable in his quest for spiritual understanding. Of the three boons offered by Yama to the young boy, the first one assures him of

¹⁴ The principal Upanishads were composed between 700 and 400 B.C. as an answer to the Aryan quest for the deeper philosophical answers of the meaning of life and the relation of the individual to the great cosmic forces. They elaborated a system of intelligent monism, shifting the focus away from ritualism to philosophical inquiry.

return to his father after his journey through the realm of Death like Gilgamesh, Odysseus and Aeneas. For the second boon, Naciketas asks Yama for the rituals of the heavenly fire, (later called the Naciketas fire), which grants entry into heaven and Immortality. What is this Immortality that Naciketas asks Yama about? Yama's answer defines it:

In the heavenly world is no fear whatsoever
Nor there art thou. Not from old age does one fear.
Over both having crossed—hunger and thirst too.
Gone beyond sorrow, one rejoices in the heaven world...
...Heaven-world people partake of immortality. (*Katha Upanishad*, Valli I: 12-13)

In the heavenly world one can transcend earthly emotions, the cycles of birth and re-birth and merge into the eternal life of the soul, the "atman" situated deep within oneself and ultimately with the Universal soul, the Brahman. Naciketas is told by Yama the Lord of Death that the ability to rise above the emotions of pleasure and pain, grief and fear is acquired through discipline and mastery over the experiences of the senses, over earthly temptations and through a retreat into one's innermost self, beyond "manas and 'buddhi'" into the realization of the Self and through this of the Cosmic Spirit:

Higher than the senses ("indriya") is the mind ("manas")
Above the mind is the true being ("sattva")
Over the true being is the Great Self ("buddhi"/intellect)
Above the Great is the Unmanifest ("avyakta")
Higher than the Unmanifest, however is the Person ("Purusha")
All pervading and without any mark (a-linga')
Knowing which a man is liberated and goes to Immortality. (*Katha Upanishad*, Valli V: 7-8)

When one is liberated from all the desires of the heart and from the temptations of all worldly pleasures¹⁵, then one achieves Immortality. Having achieved this, the boy Naciketas has achieved transcendence.

Perhaps the most profound words on Death and Immortality in Hinduism come from the *Bhagvad Gita*. Prince Arjuna the greatest of warriors of the *Mahabharata*, standing in the midst of the two opposing armies on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, is assailed by similar sorrow about death and doubts about his duty of fighting a war for the sake of recovering their usurped kingdom when such a battle would inevitably bring about the death of his elders, his kin, his teachers. Grief for the inevitable death of these near and dear ones which will be the outcome of the impending war overcomes him as it does Gilgamesh, and paralyzes his capacity as a warrior:

Etannahantumicchami
Ghnato 'pi madhusadana
Apitrailokyarajasya
Hetohkim nu mahikrte. (*Bhagvad Gita*, I:35)

Arjuna's doubts and fears and Lord Krishna's answer form the great philosophical section of the *Bhagvad Gita* within the epic. He is instructed and consoled by his divine charioteer Lord Krishna in the form of the

¹⁵ Yama tells Naciketas that the path to the attainment of Immortality is that he should have lighted the Naciketas fire thrice, have "attained union with the three" (father, mother and teacher) and "done the triple work" of performing sacrifice, studying the Hindu scriptures and given alms to the Brahmins and the poor is deserving of this immortality of heavenly peace. The Naciketas fire is not the ordinary fire. It can be experienced by him who has retreated into the deepest realms of the secret realm of the heart where the ego and material desires have been extinguished. He who realizes Brahman goes beyond sorrow and Death.

Universal Spirit. Krishna impresses upon him the futility of grief for death. Why should he mourn the transient body when the Soul remains immortal:

Na jayatemriyatevakadacin
 Na yam bhutvabhavitavanabhuyah
 Ajonityahsasvato 'yam purano
 Na hanyatehanyamanesarire. (*Bhagvad Gita*, II:20)

The soul is never born, nor does he die, nor having come to be, can he cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, permanent, and primeval. The soul will not die with the death of the body. Hinduism claims the indestructibility of the Soul, not of the body as had been granted to Utnapishtim in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Yet the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in its delving into the fundamental issues of life and death and its vision of immortality has been called an existential epic, expressing a vision far ahead of its time. Gilgamesh's vain journey in search of physical immortality brings about his realization of his own frailty and limitations when he fails two simple tests set for him by the immortal Utnapishtim as a pre-condition for rejuvenation and eternal youth, if not for the immortality which he does not deserve. But what he learns during his journey into the land beyond death forms the most important and beautiful part of the text. Since Death is inevitable and the aspiration of Immortality a vainglorious search, he is told that he must enjoy the simple pleasures of life without aspiring for the impossible that can only bring disappointment and grief. Gilgamesh has thought of himself as a colossus; he comes to realize that he is no more than a child playing at being a giant. Stripped of his arrogance and power and the superficial trappings of his empire, he learns the most valuable lesson any of us can learn in life, "Know Thyself".

Though he is not granted immortality, Utnapishtim does order the boatman Urshanabi to wash him, clean off his wild appearance, shear his long and shaggy hair and unkempt clothes and anoint him with cleaning and aromatic unguents. This, on the one hand denotes the end of his period of mourning for his beloved Enkidu and his binding identification with him. But at the same time, it is a symbol of his new changed and rejuvenated self. He may not gain eternal youth, but he returns to Erech a humbled man, a reformed ruler now more aware of his responsibilities and duties than his rights of privilege.

And the poet as earlier mentioned, closes this narrative with a mentally enlightened and progressive hero. If in the Prologue, the poet has invited us to witness the glory of Erech and the mysteries of its ruler, at the end of Book XI it is Gilgamesh who invites Urshanabi, his boatman and his facilitator of change to view the glory of his city. The identity of the poet has merged into that of the epic hero:

He brought back the ancient, forgotten rites
 Restoring the temple that the Flood had destroyed
 Renewing the statutes and the sacraments
 For the welfare of the people and the sacred land. (Thompson, 2025, p. 72)

Stephen Mitchell says

When Gilgamesh leaves his city and goes into uncharted territory in search of a way beyond death, he is looking for something that is impossible to find. His quest is like the mind's search for control, order and meaning in a world where it is constantly disintegrating. The quest proves the futility of the quest. There is no way to overcome death, there is no way to control death...Not until Gilgamesh gives up on transcendence can he realize how beautiful his city is, only then, can he be freed from his restless heart, can he fully return to the place he started out from. (Mitchell, 2004, p. 63)

Gilgamesh returns to his city of Erech, stripped of delusions of power and might. He comes back as a ruler at one with his city and his people. He has learnt that the restless, incessant need for achievement and glory are futile, self-centred pursuits. In this realization he rises far above an Achilles or an Odysseus, or even an Aeneas, the heroes of the later Greco-Roman epics. He comes to see himself in humility as what he truly is. Life, glory, and achievement are transient. His transcendence must lie in overcoming the fear of death, in looking inwards and understanding his inner self and accepting his own limitations. And so, at the end of the epic which has now turned full cycle, Gilgamesh's voice merges into that of Sin-leqi-unninni, the poet of the epic.

For the first time Gilgamesh has risen above his own self-interest and acted as a responsible and compassionate king and a benefactor to his people. He has given up his quest for the impossible and is living solely for the here and now. We find that there are no moral absolutes in this epic, no judgement. The poet has presented before us human life as it is, in all its follies and delusions, with understanding and sympathy.

References

- A1-A41. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://etcsl.orinet.ac.uk/section1tr1812.html> (accessed on 1st Feb. 2022)
- Albright, W. F. (1920). Gilgames and Enkidu: Mesopotamian genii of fecundity. *The Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 40, 309-335.
- Aurobindo, S. (1989). *Essays on the Gita*. Pondicherry, India: Aurobindo Ashram Press.
- Campbell, J. (2001). *The masks of god: Occidental mythology* (1st pub in 1964). London: Souvenir Press.
- Cooper, J. S. (2002). Buddies in Babylon: Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Mesopotamian homosexuality. In T. Abusseh (Ed.), *Riches hidden in secret places: Ancient near eastern studies in memory of Thorkild Jacobsen* (pp. 73-86). Indiana: Eisenbrauns.
- Hammond, D., Jablow, A., & Brod, H. (2002). *Gilgamesh and the Sundance kid: The myth of male friendship*. U.K.: Routledge.
- Hume, R. E. (Trans.). (1927). *The thirteen Upanishads*. London: Oxford India Paperbacks, O.U.P.
- Mitchell, S. (Trans.). (2004). *Gilgamesh: A new English version*. New York: Free Press.
- Peled, I. (2016). *Masculinities and third gender: The origin and nature of an institutionalized gender otherness in the ancient near east*. Munster: Ugarit, Verlag.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (Trans.). (1989). *The Bhagvad Gita*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sollberger, E. (1962). The Tummal inscription. *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 16(2), 40-41.
- Srimad Valmiki Ramayana*, Part I. (1998). Gorakhpur, India: Gita Press.
- The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature. (n.d.). Retrieved from etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk (accessed on 31st Jan. 2022)
- Thompson, C. R. (2025). *The epic of Gilgamesh*. Global Grey E-books (1st pub. in 1928).
- Wolff, H. N. (1969). Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the heroic life. *The Journal of American Oriental Studies*, 89(2), 392-398.