

Chapter III. Katha Upanishad

This *Upanishad* contains the story of Nachiketas, who was initiated into spiritual discipline by Yama himself. The same story is also mentioned in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* and its *Brahmana* portion and also in the *Mahabharatha*, in chapter 106 of the section of moral principles. This *Upanishad* has become famous on account of its clarity and depth of imagination. Many of the thoughts expressed in it can be found in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Since it belongs to the *Katha Saakha* of the *Black* (or Krishna) *Yajur-veda* School, it is called *Kathopanishad*.

Nachiketas seeks everlasting Self-knowledge

A very strict ritualist, Yajnasravas, also known as Gautama, performed a sacrifice. As part of the sacrifice he gave away cows that were no longer able to eat grass or drink water, much less yield milk! They were too old for any useful purpose. Seeing this, his virtuous and intelligent son, Nachiketas, realised that his father was in for a great deal of sorrow because of these sinful gifts. The boy wanted to save his father from his fate as much as he could, so he asked his father to whom he intended to offer him (Nachiketas) as a gift! He pleaded that he too should be given away to someone.

At this the father got so incensed that he shouted in disgust, “I am giving you to the God of death.”

Nachiketas resolved that his father’s words must not be falsified, even though they were uttered in the world of the living, infected with birth and death. So he persuaded his father to offer him, in strict ritualistic style, as a gift to Yama. Nachiketas promptly proceeded to the abode of the God of death. He had to wait three nights before he could see Yama. Yama felt sorry for the delay and promised Nachiketas three boons, one for each night he had spent outside his doors.

Nachiketas first asked that when he returned to his native place and home at His behest, his father must welcome him gladly, bereft of all anger at his former impertinence and full of mental equanimity. His second desire was to know the secret of the absence in heaven of hunger, thirst, and fear of death.

Yama gladly gave him these boons. In addition, Yama initiated him into the mystery of a special ritual. Nachiketas listened reverentially and grasped the details of the ritual quickly and clearly. Yama was so delighted with his new disciple that He gave the sacrifice (*yaga*) a new name, *Nachiketa Agni*! This was an extra boon for the young visitor.

Nachiketas said, “Master! Man is mortal, but some say that death is not the end, that there is an entity called *Atma* that survives the body and the senses. Others argue that there is no such entity. Now that I have the chance, I wish to know about the *Atma* from you.”

Yama wanted to test the credentials of his questioner’s steadfastness and his eagerness to know the highest wisdom. If he was undeserving, Yama didn’t want to communicate the knowledge to him. So he offered to give him instead various other boons, related to worldly prosperity and happiness. He told him that the *Atma* is very subtle and elusive and is beyond the reach of ordinary understanding. He placed before him other attractive boons that could be enjoyed “more quickly” and “better”.

Nachiketas replied, “Revered master! Your description of the difficulty of understanding the *Atma* makes me

feel that I should not let this chance go by, for I can get no teacher more qualified than you to explain it to me. I ask this as my third boon and no other. The alternative boons You hold before me cannot assure me the everlasting benefit that Self-knowledge (*Atma-jnana*) alone can bestow.”

Yama teaches Nachiketas the Atmic wisdom

Pleased with Nachiketas’ faith and steadiness, Yama concluded that he was fit to receive the highest wisdom. He said, “Well, My dear boy! There are two distinct types of experiences and urges, called spiritually elevating (*sreyas*) and worldly pleasant (*preyas*). Both affect the individual. The first releases; the second leashes. One leads to salvation; the other to incarceration! If you pursue the worldly pleasing path, you leave the realisation of the highest goal of humanity far, far behind. The spiritually excellent path can be discerned only by the refined intellect; the worldly pleasant path is trodden by the ignorant and the perverted. Spiritual wisdom (*vidya*) reveals the spiritually elevating; ignorance (*a-vidya*) makes you slide into worldly pleasure. Naturally, those who seek the spiritually elevating road are very rare.”

Yama continued, “The *Atma* is agitationless, unruffled; it is consciousness, infinite and full. One who has known the *Atma* won’t be moved by the dual ideas of “is” and “is-not”, “doer” and “not-doer”, etc. The *Atma* is not even an object to be known! It is neither knower, known, nor knowledge. Discovering this is the supremest vision; informing one of this is the supremest instruction. The instructor is *Brahman*; the instruction is *Brahman*, and the instructed is also *Brahman*. Realisation of this ever-present truth saves one from all attachment and agitation, so it liberates one from birth and death. This great mystery cannot be grasped by logic; it has to be won by faith in the scriptures (*smrithis*) and experienced.

“The *Atma* is capable of being known only after vast perseverance. One has to divert the mind from its natural habitat—the objective world—and keep it in unwavering equanimity. Only a hero can succeed in this solitary internal adventure and overcome the monsters of egotism and illusion! That victory alone can remove grief.”

The highest truth can be realised by all

The teaching of the *Vedanta* is that the highest truth is capable of being realised by all. All the texts proclaim so with one voice; they also say that the syllable *Om* (*Pranava*) is the symbol of the transcendent and immanent (*para* and *a-para*) *Brahman*; they declare that worship of the *Om* brings within your reach even the Cosmic Mind (*Hiranyagarbha*) stage, and it also helps you to attain two aspects of *Brahman*. The *Hiranyagarbha* is enveloped by the thinnest veil of illusion (*maya*), and, through *Om*, the veil can be rent asunder and both the transcendent and immanent *Brahman* can be realised.

The Atma is beyond the senses

The *Katthopanishad* also elaborates on the *Atma* in various ways. It says that the *Atma* is not measurable, that it can never be contained by limitations, though it appears so. The image of the Sun in a lake quivers and shakes due to the quivering and shaking of the water; the Sun is but a distant witness. It is unaffected by the media that produce the images. Likewise, the *Atma* is the witness of all this change in space and time.

The individualised ignorance (*jiva*) is the participant of the fruits of action, of right and wrong, of good and

evil; the individual (*jivi*) forges bondage through egotism and loosens the bonds through the intellect (*buddhi*), the counterforce of ignorance.

Realise that all is won the moment the senses (*indriyas*), external and internal, are put out of action. Discard them as false and misleading; merge them all in the mind (*manas*). Throw the mind back into the intellect and the individualised intelligence into the cosmic intelligence of *Hiranyagarbha*. And, having reached that stage of spiritual practice, merge the cosmic intelligence into the *Atmic* principle (*Atma-thathwa*), of which it is but a manifestation. Then you attain the stage of the perfect unruffled equanimity of Absolute Oneness (*nir-vikalpa-samadhi*), which is your true nature. That is the secret propounded by this *Upanishad*; that and the fact that all creation is but a creation, a proliferation of name and form.

Misled by the mirage, you are unable to see the desert waste; frightened by the snake (superimposed by you on the rope), you are unable to discern the basic reality. The beginningless delusion that haunts the individual (*jivi*) has to be broken through. The fourteenth *mantra* of this *Upanishad* wakes up the individual from the sleep of ages and leads him on toward the goal.

The *Atma* is beyond sound, touch, form, taste, and smell (*sabdha, sparsha, rupa, rasa, and gandha*); it knows no end. The senses are object-bound and outward-bound. The *Atma* is the prime instrument for all activity and knowledge, the inner motive-force behind everything. This delusion of manifoldness, variety, multiplicity, and manyness has to die. It is born of ignorance (*a-jnana*). The “many” is a mirage caused by “circumstances”; the feeling that you are separate from the One is the root of all this seeming birth and death through which the individual appears to go.

Cut the tree of worldly illusion

Yama then declared the nature of *Brahman* to Nachiketas, to remove his doubts on that point.

Like a light hidden by smoke, the thumb-sized supreme Spirit is eternally shining. Just as the torrent of rain falling on a peak is shattered downward in a thousand streams, the individual (*jivi*), who feels manyness and difference, falls down through manyness and goes to waste. This *Upanishad* announces that there is nothing higher than or even equal to the *Atma*. The roots of a tree are invisible; they are hidden underground, but their effect is evident in the visible flowers, right? So too, this tree of worldly illusion (*samsara-vriksha*), right? From that experience, you have to infer that the root, *Brahman*, is there as sustenance and support, said Yama.

The tree of worldly existence (*samsara*) is like the magician’s mango tree; it is just an illusion. One who has purified their intellect (*buddhi*) can see the *Atma* in it in this very life, as in a fine mirror. *Brahman* is the thing known (*jneya*) to the seeker of knowledge; it is the worshiped object, the thing attained by the seeker of attainment. The spiritually wise person is liberated by their visualisation of *Brahman*, but the worshiper reaches the world of *Brahma* after death. There, the worshiper merges in *Hiranyagarbha* and, at the end of a day of *Brahma* (*kalpa*), is liberated along with the *Hiranyagarbha* Itself.

Nachiketas understood without a flaw this knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-vidya*) that Yama taught him; he was released by death and attained *Brahman*. As far as this knowledge of *Brahman* is concerned, one who even attempts to know what it is becomes thereby a better personality, free from the dirt of sin.

The secret: learn and practise the singular Omkara

This *Upanishad* teaches in many ways the fundamental subjects: the embodiment of the *Om* (*Pranava-swarupa*), auspicious activities (*sreyas*), and knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-vidya*). My resolve is to tell you now the essence of these teachings. Of course one *mantra* is enough to save those who have sharpened intelligence and who are full of the yearning to escape. But for the dull-witted, sense-prompted individual immersed in secular pleasure-seeking, advice, however plentiful, is a waste.

The *Atma* is like the ocean; to instruct a person about it, you need not ask the person to drink the entire ocean. A single drop placed on the tongue will give the needed knowledge. So too, if you desire to know the *Upanishad*, you need not follow every *mantra*. Learn and experience the implication of one *mantra* and you can realise the goal without fail. Learn and practise. Learn to practise. That is the secret of the teaching.