

# THE KATHA UPANISHAD

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by

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These are the sentences which the great master Lord Yama spoke to Nachiketas, the great student whose story occurs in the Katha Upanishad. Certain incidents caused the ascent of the student Nachiketas to the Lord of Death—Yama. He could not meet the Lord when he went there, and for three days he had to stand at the gates of the palace of Yama, not eating and not sleeping. After three days the great master returned and asked for pardon, “My dear boy, you are Atithi, just come to my place, and unfortunately I had to make you stand here without eating and sleeping for three days and nights. As a recompense for this pain that I have caused to you unwittingly, I ask you to choose three boons from me.” The boy Nachiketas said, “I am glad that you have offered to give me three boons.” “Yes, please ask.”

“Now I shall ask for the first boon. When I return to the world from your abode, may I be received with affection by my father, by the world and by everyone.” This boon has also a special, mystical significance. Though the words of the Upanishad are couched in some sort of an epic, mythological style, the borderland of universal knowledge is the death of the human personality. The great Lord Yama, here in the context of the Upanishadic teaching, may be regarded as the Lord over the borderland between the empirical and the transcendental realms. Death is the greatest teacher. Ordinarily even the very notion of death shakes our

personality, and we learn the wisdom of life only when we are on the verge of dying. Until that time we are mostly ignoramuses. When we are drowning in water and there is no hope of coming out, when death is immanent and there are only a few more minutes left, or we have lost everything that we considered as our own, at that time we learn the wisdom of life. When everything is gone and nothing remains—even the ground under our feet is shaking—at that time we know what life is made of and what the wisdom of life is.

When Nachiketas asked for this boon as a student of the highest mysticism conceivable, we may understand from this request of Nachiketas that when we return to the world after the attainment of the wisdom of life, the world becomes a friend. At present the world is not our friend—it stands outside us as a glaring, tearing reality of which we have very little knowledge. The world is very heavily sitting on us; too much is this world for us, many a time. We dread it. We cannot consider anything in the world as our real friend because it has its own laws and regulations, and we are obliged to abide by these laws and regulations. It compels us to obey its dictates and mandates. But it suddenly changes its color and becomes part and parcel of our personal life. Jivanmukta is the name that we give to the transmuted personality of the spiritual seeker. Nachiketas may be regarded as a Jivanmukta, especially having contacted that great master of knowledge, Yama himself. “When I return to the world after having seen you, the abode of wisdom, may the world receive me with affection. May there be nothing dissonant, incongruent, disharmonious in this world, and may there be a communion of spirits and purposes between me and the world.” This boon is granted at one stroke. “Yes,” said Yama. “It is a simple thing for me. You shall have what you asked for. Now ask for a second boon.”

The second boon is something more complicated. It is deeper than the one mentioned earlier. “I have heard,” said Nachiketas, “that there is a mystery called Vaishvanara, having known which, one becomes all-knowing, omniscient.

May I be blessed with this boon.” “Yes, I shall initiate you into this mystery of the supreme wisdom of the Vaishvanara, the Universal Reality.” The necessary initiation process was carried out.

“Now ask for the third boon.” This was a crucial issue that Nachiketas raised when he asked for the third boon. “What happens to the soul after death—after the death of this body, or it may be after the death of the individuality itself—in either case, what happens to the soul?” While Yama, the Lord, was very eager and quick in the response to the questions of Nachiketas, in the case of the third question he was not willing to say anything. He said, “You should not ask this question. Nobody can understand what it is. The gods themselves have doubts about this matter. Therefore a young boy like you should not raise a question of this kind. Ask for better things—gold and silver, long life, health. The emperors of the whole world, and a long life, as long as this world lasts, all the wealth of the world, all the glory, all the majesty and magnificence of an emperor of the world I shall grant you. Do not ask this question.”

Nachiketas said, “What good is this, what is the use of this long life? What do you mean by “long life”? How long will it be? One day it has to end. So anything that has to end is to be considered as short. It may be long from one point of view, but it has to end one day. Even if it is millions of years—after millions of years, what happens? It stops. Then why do you call it “long life”? It is short. All the life put together is futile and petty. I do not want long life. And what is the good of all the glory and majesty and the beauty and the enjoyments to which you have made reference? What is enjoyment to a person whose sense organs have worn out? As long as the sense organs are vigorous, things look beautiful, tasty and worthwhile. When the senses wither away, who will enjoy the world? So why do you tempt me with these offerings? ‘Ask for better things,’ you said. What can be better than the knowledge of this mystery of the soul after its departure from this body, this tabernacle?”

Yama was cornered like this from all sides and he found that there is an impossible student in front of him. Yama might have been testing him, the mettle of the student; whatever be the case, it is also an indication as to the difficulty in knowing what the soul is. The answer, however, does not come abruptly from Yama, though he finally agreed to give the answer.

What he says is, there are two ways available for every person in this world—the way of the good and the way of the pleasant. The good is called Sreyas, the pleasant is called Preyas. There are two roads along which we can tread. We can choose what is good, or we can choose what is pleasant. It is proper for a person to choose the good. It is improper for any person to choose the pleasant, because the good does not always look pleasant, and the pleasant is certainly not always good. That which is pleasant is nothing but the reaction of the sense organs in respect of objects outside. The pleasantness is only in the sensations. If we scratch our body there is a little sensation of pleasure, but itching is necessary in order that the scratching sensation may be pleasant. Unless there is itching, there will be no sensation of pleasure when scratching. If we are not hungry, no lunch can be delicious. If we are not healthy, the world looks stupid and meaningless. If the senses are not vigorous, nothing looks beautiful—everything is ugly and black.

So, what do we mean by pleasant experiences? There is no such thing as a pleasant experience as such, by itself. It is only a relative condition created under the circumstances of an action and reaction process taking place between the sense organs, the mind and the objects outside. Would anybody pursue this path which is utter foolishness? He who pursues the path of the pleasant will fall short of his aim. It is good that we follow the good. We understand to some extent that the pleasant is not actually something existent in the objects outside—it is only a sensation, a reaction of the sense organs, and therefore unreliable to the hilt. Will an old person, in a dying condition, have a pleasant experience of anything in this world? The senses are dying completely;

there is no appetite of any kind. If pleasant things are really pleasant, they should be pleasant even at the last moment of our departure. Where is the pleasantness at that time? The condition of our body and mind and sense organs determines what we call pleasant; and also, what is pleasant to us need not be pleasant to another person. If there is real pleasantness in things, there should be pleasantness for all people equally. Why should it be attractive to us and not attractive to another person? Why is it that what we like is not liked by somebody else? This shows there is no such thing as pleasantness in anything. The pursuit of the pleasant therefore is a folly on the part of any individual.

The good is the proper path. What is the good? While we know something about the pleasant, what is the good, then? "I will not follow the path of the pleasant; I will follow the way of the good. But I should understand what is good." This also is a little difficult question. The ultimately good is to be considered as really good. He who will help us at the time of the death of this body is our real friend. That which will come with us when we are departing from this world is our real comrade. Anything else is not our friend. That which appears to be good now and is bitter tomorrow may not be considered as good. We should be always good. As they say, "A friend in need is a friend indeed." So also is the case with the good. The good should be always good, like a well-meaning mother. Nothing in this world, as far as the objectivity of things in the world is concerned, can be regarded as always good. There is nothing in this world which can be considered as always good. It appears to be good for some time only, for some reason. We have covered ourselves with blankets because it is cold; it is good to have a blanket over the body. But will it be good always, all the 12 months, all the 365 days of the year to cover ourselves with blankets and woolen clothes? No. It is relatively good, under certain conditions only; under other conditions, it is not. All appetites, all needs, all requirements, anything that we consider as necessary—all these are relative to conditions, circumstances prevailing within us as well as without us.

Therefore, nothing in this world can be regarded as finally good.

Yet, there is something that is the good of the soul of an individual. That which is permanent can be regarded as good; and as things in the world are transient and passing, they cannot also be regarded as finally good. We also pass away as far as our body is concerned, but the soul will not pass away. Therefore that which is commensurate with the needs of the soul of a person may be regarded as really good—and there is nothing in this world which can feed our soul. The world can feed our sensations. Our mind and intellect and ego can be fed by the diet of this world. But the soul is suffering. The soul is hungry. Its appetite cannot be met properly by anything in this world, because the impermanent cannot satisfy that which is permanent, and the permanent cannot be obtained through that which is impermanent. That is, that which is relatively good cannot be set in tune with the soul which is ultimately good. So one has to follow the path of the good.

Now, here the good does not necessarily mean an ethical instruction that is being given or imparted to Nachiketas. “Here is a good person.” When we make a statement like this, we mean that in conduct and character and behaviour the person is socially adaptable to conditions, and therefore we say, “Here is a good person.” But the goodness that we are referring to here in the context of the Upanishadic teaching is a spiritual good. It is not a conditioned good—under such circumstance we have to behave in this way, under another circumstance we may have to behave in another way. If this is the mandate of ethics and morality, all ethical and moral instructions stand relative to circumstance. But the metaphysical good, the spiritual good, the ultimate transcendental good is that which is good for the soul. It is not good only for some time, or only for some people, or only for certain conditions—it is good for all conditions and all times and for all individuals. This is the soul, and Nachiketas was asking what happens to the soul.

A wavering answer comes forth in the Katha Upanishad to this great question. A complete, satisfying answer can be found in certain other Upanishads, such as the Chhandogya and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishads. Tentatively Yama tells Nachiketas that when the body is shed, one takes rebirth. One can become anything according to the thoughts and the feelings entertained by the person during the tenure of this life. Our thoughts and feelings will congeal into a solid substance, as it were, of the personality which we will assume in the next incarnation. The process of incarnation is actually the process of the evolution of things. As I mentioned sometime earlier, the evolutionary process is the process of the cessation of one condition to bring about the birth of the subsequent condition. Something has to die in order that something may be born. If nothing dies, nothing will be born. There will be no transformation and no improvement of any kind if death does not take place. Many parts of the body have died in order that we could become this adult personality that we are now. If evolution is something worthwhile, death is also worthwhile. Unless some previous condition dies, the new condition cannot be born. So everyone will be reborn because of the fact that the birth of a body, such as this body of ours which is now with us, is the instrument manufactured by the psychological organ within us for the fulfillment of its needs, desires and wants.

Our desires have no end. We cannot count our desires. Though today, at this moment, we may feel that our desires are half a dozen, when these half a dozen desires are fulfilled we will find that another half a dozen will present themselves forth, and there will never be an end to this. Infinite are the desires of man due to the infinitude that is hidden in the recesses of the being of man. Inasmuch as the longings, desires and needs of the mind are infinite, a finite body cannot be a suitable instrument for the fulfillment of all these desires. An infinite series of incarnations may be necessary in order that infinite desires may be fulfilled through these instruments. What are the instruments? This body. What kind of body will we assume in the next birth? It

will be exactly commensurate with the thoughts and desires that we entertain at this moment. Whatever thought enters our mind at departure, at the time of death, that will concretise itself and will be extracted out of our personality like butter being sucked out of milk. Will we be entertaining a hope that at the last moment we will have a suitable thought, and now we can think whatever we like? No. The last thought is the fruit of the tree of life that we have lived in this world. We cannot have one kind of tree and another kind of fruit. So, whatever kind of life that we have lived through this body in this sojourn of our existence in this world, that will become the solid substance of the thought that will occur to our mind at the time of departure of this body. So do not be foolish enough to imagine that now we can live a merry life, and there is no need to bother as to what will happen to us because the time for the passing has not come— there are many years remaining, so we shall think a good thought at the time of going.

Two mistakes are committed by this kind of imagination. Firstly, it is not true that many years are ahead of us—no one can say that. So no one should entertain the idea that only after fifty years we shall have the need to think a good thought, because it is said that the last thought determines our future. But who tells us that we will be living for another fifty years? It may be another fifty minutes, or even less. The second mistake about this thought is that the last thought is nothing but the essence of all the thoughts entertained in this life, so a person cannot be a good person at the time of dying and a bad person previously. Whatever goodness that we entertained in our thoughts and feelings will congeal—as whatever was in the milk, that alone will come out as butter. We cannot get butter from a substance other than milk.

So Yama, in one sentence, says that everybody will take birth if Self-realisation does not take place before passing. If we realise the Self before the end of this life, no birth will take place. Why? Because the need for birth will not arise. Why do we take birth? Because we have a necessity to fulfill the desires that we could not fulfill through this tabernacle.

The desires were many, the body was feeble and finite, and an infinite number of desires cannot be fulfilled through a finite, feeble instrument such as the body. So another body, another series of bodies has to be undergone. But in the realisation of the Self, which is universal in its nature, desires get extinguished. There is the Nirvana that people speak of. Nirvana is the extinguishing of the flame of life. This flame, which is the transitory movement of the succession of human desire, vanishes; it is extinguished completely. This is Nirvana that is taking place.

If there is even a single desire, rebirth is unavoidable for the fulfillment of that desire. If we have fulfilled all our desires in this birth itself and nothing more is left, that would be good for us. All our desires melt here itself in the light of the Self. No desire can stand before the blaze of the knowledge of the Self. As the cloud of mist cannot stand before the blaze of the sun, this muddle of the cloud of desires cannot stand before the light of the Self, which is the Atman.

Therefore the question raised by Nachiketas is, what happens to the soul after death. The answer is that ordinarily rebirth takes place, and most people in the world are ordinary people because everyone has a desire of some kind or the other. Everyone is filled with egoism and a self-assertive nature, and therefore everyone will be reborn. Even if we are reborn, it is good to be reborn in a more advanced circumstance. If we live like a tree, we may become a tree. If we live like an animal, we may become an animal. If we are humanitarian, we will be reborn as a very good human being. But why should we not live like an angel? We can live like a veritable god in this world, and we will be reborn as an angel, a divinity in the heavens. We will enter the heavens—we may go to Brahma-loka. But no entry of any kind will be there if the Self is realised. “Athakamayamanah, yo’kamo niskama apta-kama atma-kamah, na tasya prana utkramanti, brahmaiva san brahmapyeti,” says Sage Yagnavalkya to King Janaka in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. In the context of

the transmigration of the soul, Yagnavalkya mentions here that whatever one's wish is, that will be fulfilled.

Remember very well that no wish of ours, even the pettiest, will be unfulfilled. If we think that we want something, it shall come to us. If it is a very strong desire, it may be fulfilled in this life itself. If it is a mild desire, we may have to take time for the fulfillment of that wish—it may be the next birth, or after two or three births. What happens to the person who has no desire? Now I shall speak about the man, the person who has no desire of any kind, who is bereft of any desire, who has fulfilled every desire, who loves only the Self. Only he who has love for the Universal Self can be said to have fulfilled all desires; every other person has some extraneous desire. Such a person, when he departs from this body, what happens to him? He will not depart. We generally say the soul departs. In the case of the Self-realised soul, no departure takes place. It sinks then and there into the Absolute like a bubble in the ocean. When the bubble in the ocean bursts, it does not travel some distance—it dissolves itself into the bosom of the sea, then and there. There is no space and time movement of the soul of that great being. He becomes one with the very existence then and there, here and now. One neither has to go to heaven nor to Brahma-loka, nor to the Garden of Eden—nothing of the kind, because the question of going arises only due to the concept of space and time. A timeless eternity, which is the true essence of the soul of a person, does not travel to any place. He melts here itself into Pure Existence. The soul is the Absolute, and therefore it enters the Absolute. This is what we gathered from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. So much detail cannot be found in Yama's answer in the Katha Upanishad, but many other things are casually mentioned by way of a tentative elucidation of the answer expected by Nachiketas from Yama.

The Katha Upanishad is a most beautiful Upanishad. It is worth committing to memory, if possible. There are some Ashrams in India where the residents of the Ashram are expected to recite it the whole day. It is, first of all, a very pithy introduction to spiritual life. The very first chapter of

the Katha Upanishad is something like the first chapter of the Bhagavadgita. It places before us the conditions preceding the quest of the spirit, as we have it in the first chapter of the Bhagavadgita. The second chapter of the Katha Upanishad begins with similar circumstances, as in the second chapter of the Bhagavadgita; and as the Bhagavadgita goes on, so also does the Katha Upanishad. There is some resemblance, people think, between the Bhagavadgita's approach to things and the approach of the Katha Upanishad. Literally also, from the point of view of the Sanskrit language, it is melodious and artistic—a lyrical beauty is there. A very fine, melodious style is the passage of the Katha Upanishad. Inasmuch as it touches our soul and is relevant to our own predicament at the present moment, we seem to be something like Nachiketas. We are perhaps searching for an answer of the same kind. Nachiketas expected three types of boons, and we perhaps also expect the same thing, in some way, in some measure. The Katha Upanishad is the best introduction, equal to the Bhagavadgita and all the Upanishads.

So, with these words, the major point that is raised in the Katha Upanishad may be said to be complete. Something more about the Upanishads I shall try to touch upon at another time.