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# Upanishad Vahini

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# KATHOPANISHAD

The story of Nachiketha, who was initiated in spiritual discipline by Yama Himself, is found in this Upanishad. The same story is also mentioned in the Thaithiriya Brahmana and in the Mahabharatha too, in the 106th Chapter of the Anusasanaparva. 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 Krishna Yajur Veda School, it is called Kathopanishad.

A very strict ritualist, Vaajasravas, also known as Gouthama, performed a *Yaga* (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, Nachiketha by name, realised that his

father was in for a great deal of sorrow, as a consequence of the sinful gifts. The boy wanted to save his father from his fate as far as it lay in his power. So, he asked his father, to whom he intended to offer *him* as a gift! He importuned 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." At this he resolved that his father's words must not be falsified though they were uttered in the *Jiva Loka,* infected with birth and death. So he persuaded his father to offer him, in strict ritualistic style, as a gift to Yama. Nachiketha 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 Nachiketha three boons, one for each night he spent outside his doors.

Nachiketha wanted first, 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 or thirst or the fear of death. Yama gladly gave him these boons. In addition Yama initiated him into a special ritual, and its Mystery. Nachiketha listened reverentially and grasped the details of that ritual quickly and clearly. Yama was so delighted with his new disciple that He gave the Yaga a new name, Nachiketha Agni! This was an extra boon for the young visitor. Nachiketha

said, "Master, man is mortal; but, some say that death is not the end, that there is an entity called Atma which 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 desired to test the credentials of his questioner's steadfastness and eagerness to know the Highest Wisdom. If he was undeserving, Yama did not 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 something very subtle and elusive, that it is beyond the reach of ordinary understanding and He placed before him other attractive boons that could be enjoyed more quickly and 'better.' Nachiketha replied, "Revered Master! Your description of the difficulty of understanding it makes me feel that I should not let go this chance because 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 *Atmajnana* (wisdom of true self) alone can bestow."

Seeing this *Sraddha* and this steadiness Yama was pleased, and He concluded that Nachiketha was fit to receive the highest wisdom. He said, "Well, My dear boy! There are two distinct types of experiences and urges,

called *Sreyas* and *Preyas*. Both affect the individual. The first releases. The second leashes. One leads to salvation the other to incarceration! If you pursue the Preya path, you leave the realisation of the highest goal of man, far, far behind. The Sreya path can be discerned only by the refined intellect, by *Viveka* (discrimination); the Preya path is trodden by the ignorant and the perverted. *Vidya* (knowledge) reveals the Sreyas and Avidya (ignorance) makes you slide into the Preyas. Naturally, those who seek the Sreya road are very rare."

Yama continued: "The Atma is agitationless, unruffled. It is Consciousness, infinite and full. He who has known the Atma will not be moved by the dual ideas of 'is' and 'is-not,' 'do-er' 'not-doer,' etc. The Atma is not even an object to be known! It is neither knower, known nor knowledge. Discovering this is the most supreme Vision. Informing one of this is the most supreme instruction. The Instructor is Brahmam. The instruction is Brahmam and the Instructed is also Brahmam. Realisation of this ever-present Truth saves one from all attachment and agitation, and 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 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 egoism and illusion! That victory alone can remove grief."

The teaching of the Vedantha 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 *Pranava* or the syllable *Om* is the symbol of the *Para* (higher) and the *Apara* (lower) *Brahmam.* They declare that the Upasana of the Pranava brings within your reach even the *Hiranyagarbha* (the manifestation of God) stage and helps you to attain two stages of Brahmam, too. The Hiranyagarbha is enveloped by the thinnest veil of *Maya* and through Om, it can be rent asunder, and both Para and Aparabrahmam realised.

The Kathopanishad 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 which produce the images. The Atma likewise is the witness of all this change in space and time.

The Jiva, the Individualised Ignorance, is the participant of the fruits of action, of right and wrong, of good and evil. The Jivi forges bondage through egoism

and loosens the bonds through *buddhi* (intellect), the counter force of ignorance. Realise that all is won the moment the *Indriyas* (external and internal) are put out of action. Discard them as false and misleading. Merge them all in the *Manas* (mind). Throw the Manas back into the Buddhi and the Buddhi or Individualised Intelligence into the Cosmic Intelligence of Hiranyagarbha. And, having reached that stage of Sadhana, merge the Cosmic intelligence in the Atmathatwa of which it is but a manifestation. Then you attain the stage of *Nirvikalpasamaadhi*, the perfect unruffled equanimity of Absolute Oneness which is your true Nature. That is the secret propounded by this Upanishad; that and the fact that all Creation is a proliferation of *Nama* (name) and *Rupa* (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 Jivi has to be broken through. The 14th Manthra of this Upanishad wakes up the Jivi from the sleep of ages and leads him on towards the goal.

The Atma is beyond *Sabda* (sound), *Sparsa* (touch), *Rupa*, *Rasa* (taste) and *Gandha* (smell); it knows no end. The senses are object-bound 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, many-ness, has to die. It is born of Ajnana. 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, which the individual appears to go through. Yama then declared the Nature of Brahmam to Nachiketha, to remove his doubts on that point.

Like a light hidden by smoke, the Thumb-sized Purusha (the *Angushtamaathra*) is eternally shining. As the torrent of rain falling on a peak is shattered downwards in a thousand streams, the Jivi, who feels many-ness and difference, falls down through many-ness and goes to waste. This Upanishad announces that there is nothing higher than the Atma or even equal to it. The roots of a tree are invisible. They are hidden underground; but their effect is evident in the flowers that are visible, is it not? So too, this *Samsaravriksha* (the tree of life). From that experience, you have to infer that the root, Brahmam, is there as sustenance and as support, said Yama.

The Tree of Samsara is like the magician's mango tree; it is just an illusion. He who has purified his Buddhi can see in it, as in a fine mirror, the Atma, in this very life. Brahmam is the *Jneyam*, the thing known to the seeker

of knowledge. It is the *Upaasyam*, the thing attained by the seeker of attainment. The Jnani is liberated by his visualisation of Brahmam, but the *Upasaka* reaches *Brahma Loka* after death. There, he merges in Hiranyagarbha and at the end of the *Kalpa* (Age), he is liberated along with the Hiranyagarbha Itself.

Nachiketha understood without a flaw this Brahma Vidya that Yama taught him, he was released by Death and attained Brahmam. So far as this Brahma Vidya is concerned, even he who attempts to know what it is becomes thereby a better personality, free from the taint of sin.

This Upanishad has taught in many ways the fundamental subjects: *Pranavaswarupa*, Sreyas and Brahma Vidya. My resolve is to tell you now the essence of these teachings. Of course one Manthra is enough to save those who have sharpened intelligence and who are full of the yearning to escape. 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 him to drink the entire ocean. A single drop placed on the tongue will give him the needed knowledge. So too, if you desire to know the

Upanishad, you need not follow every Manthra. Learn and experience the implication of one Manthra. You can realise the Goal without fail. Learn and practise. Learn to Practise. That is the secret of the Teaching.