



Katha Upanishad

Invocation

Om. May Brahman protect us both! May Brahman bestow upon us both the fruit of Knowledge!
May we both obtain the energy to acquire Knowledge! May what we both study reveal the
Truth! May we cherish no ill feeling toward each other!

Om. Peace! Peace! Peace!

Part One

1

Vajasravasa, desiring rewards, performed the Visvajit sacrifice, in which he gave away all his property. He had a son named Nachiketa.

When the gifts were being distributed, faith entered into the heart of Nachiketa, who was still a boy. He said to himself: Joyless, surely, are the worlds to which he goes who gives away cows no longer able to drink, to eat, to give milk, or to calve.

He said to his father: Father! To whom will you give me? He said this a second and a third time. Then his father replied: Unto death I will give you.

Among many I am the first; or among many I am the middlemost. But certainly I am never the last. What purpose of the King of Death will my father serve today by thus giving me away to him?

Nachiketa said: Look back and see how it was with those who came before us and observe how it is with those who are now with us. A mortal ripens like corn and like corn he springs up again.

Truly, like fire a brahmin guest enters a house; the householder pacifies him by giving him water and a seat. Bring him water. O King of Death!

The brahmin who dwells in a house, fasting, destroys that foolish householder's hopes and expectations, the reward of his intercourse with pious people, the merit of his kindly speech, the good results of his sacrifices and beneficial deeds and his cattle and children as well.

Yama said: O Brahmin, salutations to you! You are a venerable guest and have dwelt in my house three nights without eating; therefore choose now three favors, one for each night, O Brahmin! May all be well with me!

Nachiketa said: O Death, may Gautama, my father, be calm, cheerful and free from anger toward me! May he recognise me and greet me when I shall have been sent home by you! This I choose as the first of the three favors.

Yama said: Through my power, your father, Auddilaki Aruni, will recognise you and be again toward you as he was before. After having seen you freed from the jaws of death, he will sleep peacefully at night and bear no anger against you.

Nachiketa said: In the Heavenly World there is no fear whatsoever. You, O Death, are not there and no one is afraid of old age. Leaving behind both hunger and thirst and out of the reach of sorrow, all rejoice in Heaven. You know, O Death, the Fire—sacrifice, which leads to Heaven. Explain it to me, for I am full of faith. The inhabitants of Heaven attain immortality. This I ask as my second favor.

Yama said: I know well the Fire—sacrifice, which leads to Heaven and I will explain it to you. Listen to me. Know this Fire to be the means of attaining Heaven. It is the support of the universe; it is hidden in the hearts of the wise.

Yama then told him about the Fire, which is the source of the worlds and what bricks were to be gathered for the altar and how many and how the sacrificial fire was to be lighted. Nachiketa, too, repeated all this as it had been told him. Then Yama, being pleased with him, spoke again.

High—souled Death, being well pleased, said to Nachiketa: I will now give you another favor: this fire shall be named after you. Take also from me this many—coloured chain.

He who has performed three times this Nachiketa sacrifice, having been instructed by the three and also has performed his three duties, overcomes birth and death. Having known this Fire born of Brahman, omniscient, luminous and adorable and realised it, he attains supreme peace.

He who, having known the three, has performed three times the Nachiketa sacrifice, throws off, even here, the chains of death, overcomes grief and rejoices in Heaven.

This, O Nachiketa, is your Fire—sacrifice, which leads to Heaven and which you have chosen as your second favor. People will call this Fire by your name. Now, O Nachiketa, choose the third favor.

Nachiketa said: There is this doubt about a man when he is dead: Some say that he exists; others, that he does not. This I should like to know, taught by you. This is the third of my favors.

Yama said: On this subject even the gods formerly had their doubts. It is not easy to understand: the nature of Atman is subtle. Choose another favor, O Nachiketa! Do not press me. Release me from that favor.

Nachiketa said: O Death, even the gods have their doubts about this subject; and you have declared it to be not easy to understand. But another teacher like you cannot be found and surely no other favor is comparable to this.

Yama said: Choose sons and grandsons who shall live a hundred years; choose elephants, horses, herds of cattle and gold. Choose a vast domain on earth; live here as many years as you desires.

If you deem any other favor equal to that, choose it; choose wealth and a long life. Be the king, O Nachiketa, of the wide earth. I will make you the enjoyer of all desires.

Whatever desires are difficult to satisfy in this world of mortals, choose them as you wish: these fair maidens, with their chariots and musical instruments — men cannot obtain them. I give them to you and they shall wait upon you. But do not ask me about death.

Nachiketa said: But, O Death, these endure only till tomorrow. Furthermore, they exhaust the vigour of all the sense organs. Even the longest life is short indeed. Keep your horses, dances and songs for yourself.

Wealth can never make a man happy. Moreover, since I have beheld you, I shall certainly obtain wealth; I shall also live as long as you rule. Therefore no favor will be accepted by me but the one that I have asked.

Who among decaying mortals here below, having approached the undecaying immortals and coming to know that his higher needs may be fulfilled by them, would exult in a life over long, after he had pondered on the pleasures arising from beauty and song?

Tell me, O Death, of that Great Hereafter about which a man has his doubts.

Yama said: The good is one thing; the pleasant, another. Both of these, serving different needs, bind a man. It goes well with him who, of the two, takes the good; but he who chooses the pleasant misses the end.

Both the good and the pleasant present themselves to a man. The calm soul examines them well and discriminates. Yes, he prefers the good to the pleasant; but the fool chooses the pleasant out of greed and avarice.

O Nachiketa, after pondering well the pleasures that are or seem to be delightful, you have renounced them all. You have not taken the road abounding in wealth, where many men sink.

Wide apart and leading to different ends are these two: ignorance and what is known as Knowledge. I regard you, O Nachiketa, to be one who desires Knowledge; for even many pleasures could not tempt you away.

Fools dwelling in darkness, but thinking themselves wise and erudite, go round and round, by various tortuous paths, like the blind led by the blind.

The Hereafter never reveals itself to a person devoid of discrimination, heedless and perplexed by the delusion of wealth. "This world alone exists," he thinks, "and there is no other." Again and again he comes under my sway.

Many there are who do not even hear of Atman; though hearing of Him, many do not comprehend. Wonderful is the expounder and rare the hearer; rare indeed is the experiencer of Atman taught by an able preceptor.

Atman, when taught by an inferior person, is not easily comprehended, because It is diversely regarded by disputants. But when It is taught by him who has become one with Atman, there can remain no more doubt about It. Atman is subtler than the subtlest and not to be known through argument.

This Knowledge cannot be attained by reasoning. Atman become easy of comprehension, O dearest, when taught by another. You have attained this Knowledge now. You are, indeed, a man of true resolve. May we always have an inquirer like you!

Yama said: I know that the treasure resulting from action is not eternal; for what is eternal cannot be obtained by the non—eternal. Yet I have performed the Nachiketa sacrifice with the help of non—eternal things and attained this position which is only relatively eternal.

The fulfilment of desires, the foundation of the universe, the rewards of sacrifices, the shore where there is no fear, that which adorable and great, the wide abode and the goal—all this you have seen; and being wise, you have with firm resolve discarded everything.

The wise man who, by means of concentration on the Self, realises that ancient, effulgent One, who is hard to be seen, unmanifest, hidden and who dwells in the buddhi and rests in the body—he, indeed, leaves joy and sorrow far behind.

The mortal who has heard this and comprehended it well, who has separated that Atman, the very soul of dharma, from all physical objects and has realised the subtle essence, rejoices because he has obtained that which is the cause of rejoicing. The Abode of Brahman, I believe, is open for Nachiketa.

Nachiketa said: That which you see as other than righteousness and unrighteousness, other than all this cause and effect, other than what has been and what is to be—tell me That.

Yama said: The goal which all the Vedas declare, which all austerities aim at and which men desire when they lead the life of continence, I will tell you briefly: it is Om.

This syllable Om is indeed Brahman. This syllable is the Highest. Whosoever knows this syllable obtains all that he desires.

This is the best support; this is the highest support. Whosoever knows this support is adored in the world of Brahma.

The knowing Self is not born; It does not die. It has not sprung from anything; nothing has sprung from It. Birthless, eternal, everlasting and ancient, It is not killed when the body is killed.

If the killer thinks he kills and if the killed man thinks he is killed, neither of these apprehends aright. The Self kills not, nor is It killed.

Atman, smaller than the small, greater than the great, is hidden in the hearts of all living creatures. A man who is free from desires beholds the majesty of the Self through tranquillity of the senses and the mind and becomes free from grief.

Though sitting still, It travels far; though lying down, It goes everywhere. Who but myself can know that luminous Atman who rejoices and rejoices not?

The wise man, having realised Atman as dwelling within impermanent bodies but Itself bodiless, vast and all—pervading, does not grieve.

This Atman cannot be attained by the study of the Vedas, or by intelligence, or by much hearing of sacred books. It is attained by him alone whom It chooses. To such a one Atman reveals Its own form.

He who has not first turn away from wickedness, who is not tranquil and subdued and whose mind is not at peace, cannot attain Atman. It is realised only through the Knowledge of Reality.

Who, then, knows where He is—He to whom Brahmins and kshatriyas are mere food and death itself a condiment?

3

Two there are who dwell within the body, in the intellect, the supreme akasa of the heart, enjoying the sure rewards of their own actions. The knowers of Brahman describe them as light and shade, as do those householders who have offered oblations in the Five Fires and also those who have thrice performed the Nachiketa sacrifice.

We know how to perform the Nachiketa sacrifice, which is the bridge for sacrificers; and we know also that supreme, imperishable Brahman, which is sought by those who wish to cross over to the shore where there is no fear.

Know the atman to be the master of the chariot; the body, chariot; the intellect, the charioteer; and the mind, the reins.

The senses, they say, are the horses; the objects, the roads. The wise call the atman—united with the body, the senses and the mind—the enjoyer.

If the buddhi, being related to a mind that is always distracted, loses its discriminations, then the senses become uncontrolled, like the vicious horses of a charioteer.

But if the buddhi, being related to a mind that is always restrained, possesses discrimination, then the senses come under control, like the good horses of a charioteer.

If the buddhi, being related to a distracted mind, loses its discrimination and therefore always remains impure, then the embodied soul never attains the goal, but enters into the round of births.

But if the buddhi, being related to a mind that is restrained, possesses discrimination and therefore always remains pure, then the embodied soul attains that goal from which he is not born again.

A man who has discrimination for his charioteer and holds the reins of the mind firmly, reaches the end of the road; and that is the supreme position of Vishnu.

Beyond the senses are the objects; beyond the objects is the mind; beyond the mind, the intellect; beyond the intellect, the Great Atman; beyond the Great Atman, the Unmanifest; beyond the Unmanifest, the Purusha. Beyond the Purusha there is nothing: this is the end, the Supreme Goal.

That Self hidden in all beings does not shine forth; but It is seen by subtle seers through their one—pointed and subtle intellects.

The wise man should merge his speech in his mind and his mind in his intellect. He should merge his intellect in the Cosmic Mind and the Cosmic Mind in the Tranquil Self.

Arise! Awake! Approach the great and learn. Like the sharp edge of a razor is that path, so the wise say—hard to tread and difficult to cross.

Having realised Atman, which is soundless, intangible, formless, undecaying and likewise tasteless, eternal and odourless; having realised That which is without beginning and end, beyond the Great and unchanging—one is freed from the jaws of death.

The wise man who has heard and related the eternal story of Nachiketa, told by Death, is adored in the world of Brahman.

And he who, practising self—control, recites the supreme secret in an assembly of Brahmins or at a after—death ceremony obtains thereby infinite rewards. Yes, he obtains infinite rewards.

Part Two

1

Yama said: The self—existent Supreme Lord inflicted an injury upon the sense—organs in creating them with outgoing tendencies; therefore a man perceives only outer objects with them and not the inner Self. But a calm person, wishing for Immortality, beholds the inner Self with his eyes closed.

Children pursue outer pleasures and fall into the net of widespread death; but calm souls, having known what is unshakable Immortality, do not covet any uncertain thing in this world.

It is through Atman that one knows form, taste, smell, sounds, touches and carnal pleasures. Is there anything that remains unknown to Atman? This, truly, is That.

It is through Atman that one perceives all objects in sleep or in the waking state. Having realised the vast, all—pervading Atman, the calm soul does not grieve.

He who knows the individual soul, the experiencer of the fruits of action, as Atman, always near and the Lord of the past and the future, will not conceal himself from others. This, truly, is That.

He truly knows Brahman who knows the First—born, the offspring of austerity, created prior to the waters and dwelling, with the elements, in the cave of the heart. This, truly, is That.

He truly knows Brahman who knows Aditi, the soul of all deities, who was born in the form of Prana, who was created with the elements and who, entering into the heart, abides therein. This, truly, is That.

Agni, hidden in the two fire—sticks and well guarded—like a child in the womb, by its mother—is worshipped day after day by men who are awake and by those who offer oblations in the sacrifices. This, truly, is That.

Whence the sun rises and whither it goes to set, in whom all the devas are contained and whom none can ever pass beyond—This, truly, is That.

What is here, the same is there and what is there, the same is here. He goes from death to

death who sees any difference here.

By the mind alone is Brahman to be realised; then one does not see in It any multiplicity whatsoever. He goes from death to death who sees multiplicity in It. This, truly, is That.

The Purusha, of the size of a thumb, dwells in the body. He is the Lord of the past and the future. After knowing Him, one does not conceal oneself any more. This, truly, is That.

The Purusha, of the size of a thumb, is like a flame without smoke. The Lord of the past and the future, He is the same today and tomorrow. This, truly, is That.

As rainwater falling on a mountain peak runs down the rocks in all directions, even so he who sees the attributes as different from Brahman truly runs after them in all directions.

As pure water poured into pure water becomes one with it, so also, O Gautama, does the Self of the sage who knows.

2

There is a city with eleven gates belonging to the unborn Atman of undistorted Consciousness. He who meditates on Him grieves no more; liberated from the bonds of ignorance, he becomes free. This, truly, is That.

He is the sun dwelling in the bright heavens. He is the air in the interspace. He is the fire dwelling on earth. He is the guest dwelling in the house. He dwells in men, in the gods, in truth, in the sky. He is born in the water, on earth, in the sacrifice, on the mountains. He is the True and the Great.

He it is who sends prana upward and who leads apana downward. All the devas worship that adorable One seated in the middle.

When the soul, identified with the body and dwelling in it, is torn away from the body, is freed from it, what then remains? This, truly, is That?

No mortal ever lives by prana, which goes up, nor by apana, which goes down. Men live by something different, on which these two depend.

Well then, Gautama, I shall tell you about this profound and eternal Brahman and also about what happens to the atman after meeting death.

Some jivas enter the womb to be embodied as organic beings and some go into non—organic matter—according to their work and according to their knowledge.

He, the Purusha, who remains awake while the sense—organs are asleep, shaping one lovely form after another, that indeed is the Pure, that is Brahman and that alone is called the Immortal. All worlds are contained in Him and none can pass beyond. This, truly, is That.

As the same non—dual fire, after it has entered the world, becomes different according to whatever it burns, so also the same non—dual Atman, dwelling in all beings, becomes different according to whatever It enters. And It exists also without.

As the same non—dual air, after it has entered the world, becomes different according to whatever it enters, so also the same non—dual Atman, dwelling in all beings, becomes different according to whatever It enters. And It exists also without.

As the sun, which helps all eyes to see, is not affected by the blemishes of the eyes or of the external things revealed by it, so also the one Atman, dwelling in all beings, is never contaminated by the misery of the world, being outside it.

There is one Supreme Ruler, the inmost Self of all beings, who makes His one form manifold. Eternal happiness belongs to the wise, who perceive Him within themselves—not to others.

There is One who is the eternal Reality among non—eternal objects, the one truly conscious Entity among conscious objects and who, though non—dual, fulfils the desires of many. Eternal peace belongs to the wise, who perceive Him within themselves—not to others.

The sages realise that indescribable Supreme Joy as “This is That.” How can I realise It? Is It self—luminous? Does It shine brightly, or not?

The sun does not shine there, nor the moon and the stars, nor these lightnings—not to speak of this fire. He shining, everything shines after Him. By His light all this is lighted.

3

This is that eternal Asvattha Tree with its root above and branches below. That root, indeed, is called the Bright; That is Brahman and That alone is the Immortal. In That all worlds are contained and none can pass beyond. This, truly, is That.

Whatever there is—the whole universe—vibrates because it has gone forth from Brahman, which exists as its Ground. That Brahman is a great terror, like a poised thunderbolt. Those who know It become immortal.

From terror of Brahman, fire burns; from terror of It, the sun shines; from terror of It, Indra and Vayu and Death, the fifth, run.

If a man is able to realise Brahman here, before the falling asunder of his body, then he is liberated; if not, he is embodied again in the created worlds.

As in a mirror, so in the buddhi; as in a dream, so in the World of the Fathers; as in water, so Brahman is seen in the World of the Gandharvas; as in light and shade, so in the World of Brahma.

Having understood that the senses have their separate origin and that they are distinct from Atman and also that their rising and setting belong to them alone, a wise man grieves no more.

Beyond the senses is the mind, beyond the mind is the intellect, higher than the intellect is the Great Atman, higher than the Great Atman is the Unmanifest.

Beyond the Unmanifest is the Person, all—pervading and imperceptible. Having realised Him, the embodied self becomes liberated and attains Immortality.

His form is not an object of vision; no one beholds Him with the eye. One can know Him when He is revealed by the intellect free from doubt and by constant meditation. Those who know this become immortal.

When the five instruments of knowledge stand still, together with the mind and when the intellect does not move, that is called the Supreme State.

This, the firm Control of the senses, is what is called yoga. One must then be vigilant; for yoga can be both beneficial and injurious.

Atman cannot be attained by speech, by the mind, or by the eye. How can It be realised in any other way than by the affirmation of him who says: “He is”?

He is to be realised first as Existence limited by upadhis and then in His true transcendental nature. Of these two aspects, Atman realised as Existence leads the knower to the realisation of His true nature.

When all the desires that dwell in the heart fall away, then the mortal becomes immortal and here attains Brahman.

When all the ties of the heart are severed here on earth, then the mortal becomes immortal. This much alone is the teaching.

There are one hundred and one arteries of the heart, one of which pierces the crown of the head. Going upward by it, a man at death attains immortality. But when his prana passes out by other arteries, going in different directions, then he is reborn in the world.

The Purusha, not larger than a thumb, the inner Self, always dwells in the hearts of men. Let a man separate Him from his body with steadiness, as one separates the tender stalk from a blade of grass. Let him know that Self as the Bright, as the Immortal—yes, as the Bright, as

the Immortal.

Having received this wisdom taught by the King of Death and the entire process of yoga, Nachiketa became free from impurities and death and attained Brahman. Thus it will be also with any other who knows, in this manner, the inmost Self.

End of Katha Upanishad

Peace Chant

Om. May Brahman protect us both! May Brahman bestow upon us both the fruit of Knowledge! May we both obtain the energy to acquire Knowledge! May what we both study reveal the Truth! May we cherish no ill feeling toward each other!

Om. Peace! Peace! Peace!

“Katha Upanishad.” *Sacred Books of the East*. Volume 1. Trans. Max Muller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1881. Translation updated by M. Russo.

© SophiaOmni, 2011. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.