

The Kathopanishad

Shantipath

May the *Paramatman* protect us both (the teacher and the student) together . May he nurture the both of us together . May we gain capability relating to knowledge together . May what the both of us have studied be lustrous . May we not hate .

Aum . Shanti ! Shanti ! Shanti !

Adhyaya One

Valli One

It is known (famous) that , desirous of the fruits of *yagna** , the son of Vajashrava donated away all his wealth (in the *Vishwajeet*** *yagna*) . He had a renowned son by the name of Nachiketa .[1]

* Fire Sacrifice

** World-winning (a *yagna* to literally win the whole world)

At the time the *dakshinas** (in the form of cows) were being taken , in him (Nachiketa) - he was only a child yet – entered the feeling of faith** . He started thinking : [2]

* Gifts to be given away on the occasion (of the *yagna*)

** More accurately , the *aastikbuddhi*

Those who have finished drinking water , those whose eating of grass has ceased , those whose milk has been sucked dry and those whose reproductive power has waned , when such cows are given away as gifts , the giver goes to the joyless worlds . [3]

Then he said to his father , “O father ! To whom shall you give me ?” . In the same manner , he asked a second and a third time . Then his father said to him , “I give you to death” . [4]

(Nachiketa said :) Among many (sons or students) I am the foremost , and among many I am middlemost . What work of *yama** is it which my father will fulfill through me ? [5]

* The god of death

(Nachiketa said :) Think of the way those before us acted , and look at the ones who are with us now . Like a field a man ripens (and dies) , and like a field springs up again . [6]

The Brahmin guest enters a house like fire . The householder calms him with water . Thus , O king of death , bring him water ! [7]

In the house of one in which a Brahmin guest stays without partaking of food , that dim-witted man's wishes of acquisition of things known and unknown , the fruits of his intercourse with pious men , the fruits of his pious utterances , and the fruits of his good deeds , sacrifices , as well as his sons and cattle , all are destroyed by him . [8]

(Yama said :) O Brahmin ! I bow to thee; may I be blessed* . You , worthy of bowing to , have yet stayed for three nights in my house without partaking of food; therefore , for each night , ask of me one boon . [9]

* More literally , may all be well with me

(Nachiketa said :) O Yama ! For the first of the three boons I ask that my father be calm , cheerful of mind , free of anger , and that he recognise me and talk with me when you send me back . [10]

(Yama said :) By my intercession , the son of Arun , Audyalaka , shall recognise you . In the night he shall sleep happily , for having seen you return from the jaws of death . [11]

(Nachiketa said :) O god of death ! There is no fear in the Heavenly Realm . There even your power does not reach . There none are afraid of old age . In the Heavenly Realm , men , beyond hunger or thirst , experience bliss and are above sorrow . [12]

(Nachiketa said :) O Death ! You know the fire of sacrifice which leads to heaven , so describe it to my faith-filled self , through which the men ascended to heaven achieve immortality . This I ask for my second boon . [13]

(Yama said :) O Nachiketa ! I , knowing the heaven-giving fire , shall explain it to you . Understand it well from me . It exists in the comprehension of the wise , it is the support of worlds . [14]

It is then said that Yama explained to Nachiketa the fire and the number and nature of the bricks for it and its kindling . Then Nachiketa repeated to him what he had been told . Pleased by this , Yama again spoke : [15]

(Yama said :) Now I grant you another (a fourth) boon . This fire shall gain fame by your name . Also take this many-coloured chain* . [16]

* More literally , a *maala* , either a necklace or a string of prayer beads

(Yama said :) He who performs thrice this Nachiketa sacrifice , being instructed by the three (the mother , the father , and the teacher) goes beyond birth and death . He knows and experiences this , born of Brahma(n) , knowledgeable and worthy of praise , and attains to supreme peace . [17]

(Yama said :) That knower of the three (that is , what/who the bricks are , how many in number , and how the fire-sacrifice is performed) who performs the Nachiketa sacrifice three times , even before the death of the body , attains heavenly bliss , breaks the bonds of death , and goes beyond sorrow . [18]

(Yama said :) O Nachiketa ! The fire through which one attains heaven , for which you asked for with the second boon has been told to you . People shall call this fire yours . Ask now for the third boon . [19]

(Nachiketa said :) About men who have passed away (died) there is doubt; some people say that they remain (that they exist) and some say that they do not . For the third of my boons I ask of you knowledge of this . [20]

(Yama said :) In older times even the gods had their doubts about this , for this is not easy knowledge to know . O Nachiketa ! Ask for some other boon , do not press me . From this boon please free me . [21]

(Nachiketa said :) O Death ! Surely , in this regard even the gods had their doubts , and you yourself say it is not easy to know . Thus there can be no better teacher of this subject than you , nor can any other boon be like this . [22]

(Yama said :) O Nachiketa ! Ask for sons and grandsons who live a hundred years , ask for a wealth of animals , for elephants , for gold and horses , ask for the entire Earth , ask for a life as long as you want . [23]

(Yama said :) If you consider any boon equal to this , ask for it , ask for wealth , ask for an empire over the Earth . May you attain old age on this Earth . I can make you the enjoyer of your desires . [24]

(Yama said :) Ask for the desires which are difficult to satisfy in the world of mortals . Here you have these maidens with instruments and chariots . They are not obtainable by men . They shall serve you . But O Nachiketa ! Do not ask me questions concerning death . [25]

(Nachiketa said :) O Lord Yama ! These experiences are of the type of which one is uncertain of their remaining the next day , and they dim the lustre of the senses . This entire lifetime is very small . Keep your vehicles and your songs and dances (for I have no interest in them) . [26]

(Nachiketa said :) Man cannot be satiated with wealth . Now that I have seen you , I shall obtain wealth as it is . As long as you rule I shall live , yet my requested boon remains unchanged . [27]

(Nachiketa said :) Which mortal , who undergoes decay , shall consider the pleasures of song and dance , having approached the undecaying immortals ? [28]

(Nachiketa said :) O Death ! Concerning that of which it is doubted “it is or it is not” and that sure knowledge of the other world is that which I want to know . Nachiketa asks for no other boon . [29]

Note : It may seem strange that a son asks a father who he himself will be given to . To understand this , it is necessary to understand that in the given *yagna* , it is necessary to give away everything you are attached to and possess , including your son . Nachiketa saw that his father was giving away cows whose productive life had come to an end (as given in [3]) , and understood that this did not behoove someone his father's stature (that of a king) . Thus , he asks his father as to whom he himself shall be given . His father does not reply , and , being asked thrice , is angered , and in a moment of anger , he gives his son away to death . The rest of the Upanishad is based on the dialogue between Nachiketa and Yama about the nature of the soul .