

Self and Immortality: Nachiketa, the young student's dialogue in the Katha Upanishad

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Kathopanishad is the story of the conversation between Yama, Lord of death and **Nachiketa**, the young 12 year boy, pre puberty age (*anagata smasru*), who left home in search of the meaning of death and beyond. Nachiketa was a truth seeker and couldn't tolerate his father's deceptions while performing a yajna (giving old infertile cows as gifts to brahmins) and challenged him with searching questions in the open assembly. On this the father got offended and sent him away from home. As a parting shot the father shouted, "go to hell" and Nachiketa went in search of the Lord of death and hell. He reaches the abode of death and was told that Yama was away. The young seeker waits outside without sleep or food and when Yama returned from tour was amazed to see this determined, fearless boy in contemplation. The pleased Yama offered Nachiketa three boons in lieu of the three days that he spent waiting.

First boon was encashed for the peace of his father. Nachiketas knew that his father would be upset and anxious about his whereabouts and welfare. Second boon was encashed for the community's sake. He knows from Yama the secret of fire sacrifice by which he could bring progress and prosperity to the community.

The third boon was used to ask a spiritual question.

What is beyond death? Is there any soul, if so does it survive the disintegration of the body? Nachiketas pleads that this question has been plaguing humanity and that he wanted an answer. Yama, the **merchant of death**, was slightly startled. He didn't want to reveal the secret of death that easily. Yama tries to dissuade Nachiketa from asking such difficult questions whose answer the young boy may not grasp. But the more Yama insisted, the more Nachiketa persisted. Yama tries to scare, tempt and distract Nachiketa from pursuing that question. Finally pleased with the resolve of the boy, Yama yielded and started instructing him.

First Yama said that there are two paths that tempt humans--one that of material pleasure/preyas and the other that of spiritual bliss/shreyas. The earlier leads to death and the latter to immortality. By a process of detached thinking the clear minded choose the path of immortality and the muddle headed fall for the path of pleasure and eventual pain and death.

The great awakening call: *uttishtata jagrata praapya varaan nibodhata* (arise awake and stop not till the goal is reached), is found in this Upanishad. Life is like walking on

a razor's edge, says [Katha Upanishad](#). Somerset Maugham took this phrase as a title for one of his novels. Another famous imagery in the Katha, is that of the chariot, and the tree with roots upward. The imagery of the tree that has its root growing upwards, branches downward, indicates the tree of life with roots as eternal consciousness and branches as the visible sensible worlds.

Nachiketa further clarifies his query: Is there anything that is beyond good and bad, beyond past and present, beyond doing and non doing? He seeks for a ground that supports all these flow and flux – A changeless support for the changing world.

This Upanishad reveals a self that lights up the body-mind-senses complex, but untouched by their limitations. It also talks about the millions of subtle channels/*naadis* that branch off from the heart through which the life energy flows. It again reiterates that everything in this universe is an expression of that universal spirit, the Brahman. The main theme is the spiritual foundation of the material universe – consciousness, and unity of all life forms. Senses are higher than the objective world, feeling mind is higher than senses, discriminating intellect is higher than mind, higher than the intellect is the collective conscious, higher than the collective conscious is the collective unconscious and higher than the collective unconscious is pure consciousness. That is the [final destination](#). Therefore resolve words in mind, resolve mind in the [pure heart](#), resolve pure heart in the [higher self](#).

Its philosophy and psychology aside, Katha Upanishad is an interesting text because of the language, style and humor in it as a literary piece. Nachiketa's use of sophisticated sarcasm on Yama the god of death inspires us to give otherwise metaphysical ideas, a context of lived experience and enquiry. The method of dialogue, like in many other Indian texts, brings in different points of views.