

Katha Upanishad of the Black Yajurveda

First Cycle: First Chapter

uśan ha vai vājaśravasaḥ sarvavedasaṁ dadau:
tasya ha naciketā nāma putra āsa. (1)

1. Vajasravasa, desiring, gave all he had. Now Vajasravasa had a son named Nachiketas.

taṁ ha kumāraṁ santaṁ dakṣiṇāsu nīyamānāsu śraddhā-viveśa, so'manyata. (2)

2. As the gifts were led past, faith took possession of him who was yet a boy unwed and he pondered:

pītodakā jagdhatṛṇā dugdhadohā nirindriyāḥ,
anandā nāma te lokās tān sa gacchata tā dadat. (3)

3. "Cattle that have drunk their water, eaten their grass, yielded their milk, worn out their organs, of undelight are the worlds which he reaches who gives such as these."

sa hovāca pitaram, tāta kasmai mām dāsyasīti
dvitīyaṁ tṛtīyaṁ taṁ hovāca: mṛtyave tvā dadāmīti. (4)

4. He said to his father, "Me, O my father, to whom wilt thou give?" A second time and a third he said it, and he replied, "To Death I give thee."

bahūnām emi prathamah, bahūnām emi madhyamah,
kiṁ svid yamasya kartavyam yan mayādya kariṣyati. (5)

5. "Among many I walk the first, among many I walk the midmost; something Death means to do which today by me he will accomplish."

anupaśya yathā pūrve pratipaśya tathāpare,
sasyam iva martyaḥ pacyate sasyam ivajāyate punaḥ. (6)

6. "Look back and see, even as were the men of old,—look round!—even so are they that have come after. Mortal man withers like the fruits of the field and like the fruits of the field he is born again."

vaiśvānaraḥ praviśaty atithir brāhmaṇo grhān:
tasyaitām śāntīm kurvanti, hara vaivasvatodakam. (7)

His attendants say to Yama:

7. "Fire is the Brahmin who enters as a guest the houses of men; him thus they appease. Bring, O son of Vivasvan,¹ the water of the guest-rite.

āśā-pratīkṣe saṁgatam sūnṛtām ceṣṭāpūrte putra-paśūmś ca sarvān,
etad vṛṅkte puruṣasyālpamedhaso yasyānaśnan vasati brāhmaṇo gr̥he. (8)

8. "That man of little understanding in whose house a Brahmin dwells fasting, all his hope and his expectation and all he has gained and the good and truth that he has spoken and the wells he has dug and the sacrifices he has offered and all his sons and his cattle are torn from him by that guest unhonoured."

tisro rātrīr yād avatsīr gr̥he me'naśnan brahman atitthir namasyaḥ.
namaste'stu brahman; svasti me'stu tasmāt prati trīn varān vṛṅiṣva. (9)

Yama speaks:

9. "Because for three nights thou hast dwelt in my house, O Brahmin, a guest worthy of reverence,—salutation to thee, O Brahmin, on me let there be the weal,—therefore three boons do thou choose; for each night a boon."

śānta-saṁkalpaḥ sumanā yathā syād vīta-manyur gautamo mābhi mṛtyo,
tvat-prasṛṣṭam mābhivadet-pratīta, etat trayāṅgām prathamam varam vṛṅe. (10)

Nachiketas speaks:

10. "Tranquillised in his thought and serene of mind be the Gautama, my father, let his passion over me pass away from him; assured in heart let him greet me from thy grasp delivered; this boon I choose, the first of three."

yathā purastād bhavitā pratīta auddālakir āruṅir matprasṛṣṭaḥ,
sukham rātrīś śayitā vītamanyus tvām dadṛśivān mṛtyumukhāt pramuktam. (11)

Yama speaks:

11. "Even as before assured in heart and by me released shall he be, Auddalaki Aruni, thy father; sweetly shall he sleep through the nights and his passion shall pass away from him, having seen thee from death's jaws delivered."

svarge loke na bhayaṁ kiṁ ca nāsti na tatra tvaṁ na jarayā bibheti,
ubhe tīrtvā aśanāyā pipāse śokātigo modate svarga-loke. (12)

¹ Yama, lord of death, is also the master of the Law in the world, and he is therefore the child of the Sun, luminous Master of Truth from which the Law is born.

Nachiketas speaks:

12. "In heaven fear is not at all, in heaven, O Death, thou art not, nor old age and its terrors; crossing over hunger and thirst as over two rivers, leaving sorrow behind the soul in heaven rejoices."

sa tvam agniṃ svargyam adhyeṣi mṛtyo, prabrūhi taṃ śraddadānāya mahyam,
svarga-lokā amṛtatvam bhajanta, etad dvitīyena vṛṇe vareṇa. (13)

13. "Therefore that heavenly Flame² which thou, O Death, studieth, expound unto me, for I believe. They who win their world of heaven, have immortality for their portion. This for the second boon I have chosen."

pra te bravīmi tad u me nibodha svargyam agniṃ naciketaḥ prajānan
anantalokāptim atho pratiṣṭhām viddhi, tvam etaṃ nihitaṃ guhāyām. (14)

Yama speaks:

14. "Hearken to me and understand, O Nachiketas; I declare to thee that heavenly Flame, for I know it. Know this to be the possession of infinite existence and the foundation and the thing hidden in the secret cave of our being."

lokādim agniṃ tam uvāca tasmai, yā iṣṭakā, yāvatīr vā, yathā vā.
sa cāpi tat pratsvadat yathoktam; athāsya mṛtyuḥ punar evāha tuṣṭaḥ. (15)

15. Of the Flame that is the world's beginning³ he told him and what are the bricks to him and how many and the way of their setting; and Nachiketas too repeated it even as it was told; then Death was pleased and said to him yet farther;

tam abravīt prīyamāṇo mahātmā varam tavehādya dadāmi bhūyaḥ.
tavaiva nāmnā bhavitāyam agniḥ, sṛṅkāṃ cemām aneka-rūpām gṛhāṇa. (16)

² The celestial force concealed subconsciously in man's mortality by the kindling of which and its right ordering man transcends his earthly nature; not the physical flame of the external sacrifice to which these profound phrases are inapplicable.

³ The Divine Force concealed in the subconscious is that which has originated and built up the worlds. At the other end in the superconscious it reveals itself as the Divine Being, Lord and Knower who has manifested Himself out of the Brahman.

16. Yea; the Great Soul was gratified and said to him, "Yet a farther boon today I give thee; for even by thy name shall this Fire be called; this necklace also take unto thee, a necklace⁴ of many figures.

triṅcīketas tribhir etya sandhim trikarma-kṛt tarati janma-mṛtyū,
brahmajajñam devam īḍyam veditvā nicāyye'mām śāntim atyantam eti. (17)

17. "Whoso lights the three fires⁵ of Nachiketas and comes to union with the Three⁶ and does the triple works,⁷ beyond birth and death he crosses; for he finds the God of our adoration, the Knower⁸ who is born from the Brahman, whom having beheld he attains to surpassing peace.

triṅcīketas trayam etad veditvā ya evam vidvāmś cinute nācīketam,
sa mṛtyu-pāsān purataḥ praṇodya śokātigo modate svarga-loke. (18)

18. "When a man has the three flames of Nachiketas and knows this that is Triple, when so knowing he beholds the Flame of Nachiketas, then he thrusts from in front of him the meshes of the snare of death; leaving sorrow behind him he in heaven rejoices.

eṣa te'gnir nacīketas svargyo yam avṛṇīthāḥ dvitīyena vareṇa.
etam agnim tavaiva pravakṣyanti janāśas; ṛṭīyam varam nacīketo vṛṇīṣva. (19).

19. "This is the heavenly Flame, O Nachiketas, which thou hast chosen for the second boon; of this Flame the peoples shall speak that it is thine indeed. A third boon choose, O Nachiketas."

yeyam prete vicikitsā manuṣye `stīyeke nāyam astīti caike;
etat vidyām anuśiṣṭas tvayāham, varāṇām eṣa varas ṛṭīyaḥ. (20)

⁴ The necklace of many figures is Prakriti, creative Nature which comes under the control of the soul that has attained to the divine existence.

⁵ Probably, the Divine Force utilised to raise to divinity the triple being of man.

⁶ Possibly, the three Purushas, soul-states or Personalities of the Divine Being, indicated by the three letters A U M. The highest Brahman is beyond the three letters of the mystic syllable.

⁷ The sacrifice of the lower existence to the divine, consummated on the three planes of man's physical, vital and mental consciousness.

⁸ The Purusha or Divine Being, Knower of the Field, who dwells within all and for whose pleasure Prakriti fulfils the cosmic play.

Nachiketas speaks:

20. "This debate that there is over the man who has passed and some say 'This he is not' and some that he is, that, taught by thee, I would know; this is the third boon of the boons of my choosing."

devair atrāpi vicikitsitam purā, na hi suvijñeyam, aṇur eṣa dharmah,
anyam varam naciketo vṛṇiṣva, mā moparotsir ati mā srjainam. (21)

Yama speaks:

21. "Even by the gods was this debated of old; for it is not easy of knowledge, since very subtle is the law of it. Another boon choose, O Nachiketas; importune me not, nor urge me; this, this abandon."

devair atrāpi vicikitsitam kila, tvam ca mṛtyo yan na suvijñeyam āttha,
vaktā cāsya tvādr̥g-anyo na labhyaḥ; nānyo varastulya etasya kaścit. (22)

Nachiketas speaks:

22. "Even by the gods was this debated, it is sure, and thou thyself hast said that it is not easy of knowledge; never shall I find another like thee⁹ to tell of it, nor is there any other boon that is its equal."

śatāyuṣaḥ putra-pautrān vṛṇiṣva bahūn paśūn hasti-hiraṇyam aśvān
bhūmer mahad-āyatanam vṛṇiṣva svayam ca jīva śarado yāvad icchasi. (23)

Yama speaks:

23. "Choose sons and grandsons who shall live each a hundred years, choose much cattle and elephants and gold and horses; choose a mighty reach of earth and thyself live for as many years as thou listest.

etat tulyam yadi manyase, varam vṛṇiṣva, vittam cira-jīvikām ca,
mahā-bhūmau naciketas tvam edhi, kāmānām tvā kāmabhājam karomi. (24)

24. "This boon if thou deemest equal to that of thy asking, choose wealth and long living; possess thou, O Nachiketas, a mighty country; I give thee thy desire of all desirable things for thy portion.

⁹ Yama is the knower and keeper of the cosmic Law through which the soul has to rise by death and life to the freedom of Immortality.

ye ye kāmā durlabhā martya-loke sarvān kāmāś chandataḥ prārthayasva.
imā rāmāḥ, sarathāḥ satūryāḥ, na hīdṛśā lambhaniyā manuṣyaiḥ,
ābhir mat-prattābhiḥ paricārayasva, naciketo maraṇam mānuprākṣiḥ. (25)

25. "Yea, all desires that are hard to win in the world of mortals, all demand at thy pleasure; lo, these delectable women with their chariots and their bugles, whose like are not to be won by men, these I will give thee, live with them for thy handmaidens. But of death question not, O Nachiketas."

śvo-bhāvā martyasya yad antakaitat sarvendriyāṇām jarayanti tejaḥ
api sarvaṁ jīvitam alpam eva tavaiva vāhās tava nṛtya-gīte. (26)

Nachiketas speaks:

26. "Until the morrow mortal man has these things, O Ender, and they wear away all this keenness and glory of his senses; nay, all life is even for a little. Thine are these chariots and thine the dancing of these women and their singing.

na vittena tarpaṇīyo manuśyaḥ, lapsyāmahe vittam adrākṣma cet tvā,
jīviṣyāmo yāvad īśiṣyasi tvaṁ varastu me varaṇīyaḥ sa eva. (27)

27. "Man is not to be satisfied by riches, and riches we shall have if we have beheld thee and shall live as long as thou shalt be lord of us.¹⁰ This boon and no other is for my choosing.

ajīryatām amṛtānām upetya jīryan martyaḥ kvadhasthaḥ prajānan
abhidhyāyan varṇaratipramodān, atidīrghe jīvite ko rameta. (28)

28. "Who that is a mortal man and grows old and dwells down upon the unhappy earth, when he has come into the presence of the ageless Immortals and knows, yea, who when he looks very close at beauty and enjoyment and pleasure, can take delight in overlong living?

yasminn idam vicikitsanti mṛtyo yat sāmparāye mahati brūhi nas tat,
yo'yaṁ varo gūḍhamanupraviṣṭo nānyam tasmān naciketā vṛṇīte. (29)

29. "This of which they thus debate, O Death, declare to me, even that which is in the great passage; than this boon which enters in into the secret that is hidden from us, no other chooses Nachiketas."

¹⁰ Life being a figure of death and Death of life, the only true existence is the infinite, divine and immortal.