

Katha Upanishad

Translated by Swami Ambikananda Saraswati

The Beginning

The story goes that . . .

Vajashrava was engaged in a sacrificial ritual watched by his son, Nachiketas. Through this rite the father hoped to achieve all that his heart desired. But the son, watching the procession of gifts his father was offering, became deeply troubled.

'These cows', the boy said to himself,

'Will surely eat no more.

Nor will any of them yield another drop of milk —

They are old and barren.

Yet my father presents them as gifts in a sacrifice.

What good can come of that?'

Nachiketas, in the midst of the ritual,

Turned and interrupted his father asking,

'Father, to whom will you give me?'

There was silence.

Nachiketas repeated his question a second time.

Then a third.

Finally his father tuned

And made the terrible pronouncement:

'To Death I give you, Nachiketas!'

Nachiketas mused to himself,

'Among many I rank highly.
But among others I am merely average.
Yet, may my father today achieve his purpose
By offering me to Death.

'Things are now as they always have been
And always will be:
We humans wither like the corn of the field.
And yet, like grain cast on the ground.
We are born again.
To the realm of Yama, the God of Death,
I now go.'

Yama, the God of Death, was a way from his realm for three days and three nights, keeping Nachiketas waiting without food or water. A warning voice sounded in his ear: 'O Yama, be careful — a Brahmin has entered your halls. You know that if you do not offer him all that an honoured guest should receive everything you have could be snatched away. These Brahmins enter a house like fire — quick, offer him water.'

Yama spoke,
'For three nights you have waited, honoured guest,
Let me now offer you my belated greetings.
And to ensure my continued well-being,
Ask any three wishes and I will grant them.
This is my promise.'

Nachiketas replied,
'This, then is my first wish:
When I return to the world,

Embodied for me in my father,
Let all disharmony between us be gone.
Let me be recognized and welcomed.'

Yama easily agreed,
'Consider it done.
When you are seen again
By the eyes of the world that sent you here,
All hostilities will have ceased
And you will be known and embraced with joy.
And I add to the promise this:
The world will rest well with you
For many days and many nights.'

Then Nachiketas said,
I understand that in heaven there is no fear.
That is because you are not there, O Yama.
Nor are those other spectres, disease and old age.
Once in heaven, one has transcended both hunger and thirst
And crossed over the river of sorrows.

'At some time I may also wish to enjoy that heavenly world
And you, O Yama, know the means:
The sacred fire ritual.
I have faith in this fire and in you.

Teach it to me —

This is my second wish.’

Yama agreed,

‘Dear boy, that sacred fire which is the means

To heaven and is the support of all the worlds,

Actually burns deep within the hidden cave

Which is in the heart of each person.

Let me reveal it to you.

Look and listen well and you will learn.’

Yama then revealed to the eager guest the essence and particulars of the sacrificial fire that first set in motion the creation of the worlds. Nachiketas repeated with understanding everything that Yama taught. Then Yama continued the teaching.

‘You have a subtle mind and a noble heart,

Nachiketas, so to my promise I add this:

The sacrificial fire through which heaven is attained

Will now be named after you.

Henceforth people will speak of this sacred ritual

While uttering your name —

Thus fame will be yours.

Accept from me this jeweled garland.

‘From now on,

Anyone who studies, who knows and who lights

the Nachiketas Sacrificial Fire,

Who commits mind, reason and spirit
To lighting this sacred fire,
And who engages in the three sacred duties
Of motiveless action, charity and self-discipline,
Will go beyond birth and death
And attain knowledge of the great birthless One —
The knowledge of which grants supreme Peace.

'Such a person, having lit the Nachiketas Sacrificial Fire,
Who is absorbed in the sacred three,
Will have cast off the bonds of death
And will rejoice in heaven.

'Knowledge of this sacred fire, O Nachiketas,
Was your second wish.
Now, state your third and final wish.'

Nachiketas spoke,

'This is my third and final wish, O Yama.
There is much confusion about death:
Some say we continue to exist
After the body has died.
Others say we do not.
Tell me the truth —
What happens when life leaves the body?'

Yama responded swiftly,

'O Nachiketas, even the gods are confused about this.

It is an extremely complex matter

That will be difficult for you to understand.

Let me suggest that you choose something else.'

Nachiketas replied,

'I am sure that even the gods have doubts.

And as you say, it cannot be easily understood.

But you, O Yama,

Are the supreme teacher on this matter.

So, really, I have no other wish.'

Yama responded.

'Ask for sons and grandsons

That will live into healthy old age.

Ask for majestic elephants and swift horses,

Ask for gold and dominion over the earth.

You could even ask for a long life for yourself

Followed by a sojourn in heaven.

'Think of some other wish

Which has an equal value to you and ask that.

Wealth perhaps,

Or to become a mighty king.

I will make you fit

For any of these that you choose.

'You know these things that are difficult to get.

Maybe you would like the company of beautiful women,

Many fine chariots and heavenly music.

But do not ask about life beyond life —

It is something you will not understand.'

Nachiketas replied,

'But you understand

These other things that you offer

Will all pass away —

Keep them,

All of them.

'Wealth has never satisfied anyone for very long;

It cannot when we know we will die.

I may well live a long life

But one day I will have to die.

I have no other wish save the one already made.

'What mortal person in this world,

Confronted by their own mortality,

Can think about beauty and riches?

Even the longest life leads to death.

'You know all there is to know

About the great beyond.

O Yama, penetrate its mystery now

And reveal it to me.

I have no other questions and

I choose no other wish.'

The Secret Within

Yama said,

There are two paths, Nachiketas.

One path leads outward and the other inward.

You can walk the way outward that leads to pleasure

Or the way inward that leads to grace.

Of these two it is the path of grace,

Though concealed, that leads to the Self.

Both of these paths lie before each person eternally.

It is the way of things.

Day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment,

The wise must distinguish one from the other –

And then choose which to walk.

The foolish, grasping first at this and then that,

Choose to walk the path of pleasure.

You, O Nachiketas,

Looked upon these objects of desire that I offered

And rejected them all.

In so doing you have chosen to walk the path of grace.

These paths lead in opposite directions.

One leads to knowledge.

The other leads to ignorance.

You clearly desire knowledge, Nachiketas,

For you spurned the objects of pleasure.

If you had chosen them

You would be like those who walk the other path –

Reveling in their wit and limited learning

They do not even know the darkness of their own ignorance.

Round and round in circles they go,

Stumbling through disease, old age and death,

People of little vision being led

Along a bumpy path by the blind.

The path of grace does not reveal itself

To one who blunders through this world

Totally committed to it and its limitations.

It is a subtle hidden path never revealed
To one who thinks that this world is all there is –
And who, so thinking, falls again and again under my hand.

Not many ever hear of the Self.
And of those that do, not many ever know It.
It is rare to find one who can teach of It.
And it is rare to find one who can learn of It.
Glory to both the teacher and the taught.

This Self cannot be revealed by one who does not know It.
And one who does not know It wholly
Can only confuse by disclosing It in part.
But when taught by one who knows It truly,
It reveals Itself through the teacher.

This Self cannot be reached by reasoning or debate –
It must manifest Itself through a knowing teacher.
Your steadfast resolve, Nachiketas,
Has made a teacher of me.
May I always be approached by students like you.
Draw near now and hear me.

That Self which you wish to know,
Which is subtle and difficult to see,

Is there – deep within the deepest part of you.

Fix all your thinking and all your enquiry

On that ancient, radiant Self.

Having heard this truth

You must embrace it completely.

Continue separating the eternal from the ephemeral

And you will attain full realization of

That most inner, most exquisite Self –

The source of true joy.

Nachiketas, you are ready for this experience.

Now walk that path of grace.

That pure Consciousness

Which is the all-knowing, indwelling Self

Is neither born nor does It die.

It did not originate from anything

Nor has It ever become anything.

Unborn, undying, constant –

It lives when this body dies.

Those who think it can be destroyed

Or that It destroys –

Neither of them knows.

For the Self does not destroy nor can It be destroyed.

Smaller than the smallest particle of an atom,
And yet more vast than the whole expanse of space,
This Self resides in the heart of all beings.
Only those who have withdrawn their hopes from this world
Are open to the grace of that glorious Self –
And only they see It.

That Self will not be found
Through much learning, thinking or listening.
What are the valid means of knowing It?

I will tell you:

It is known only through the Self within,
By the grace of That which the seeker seeks.
That Self alone reveals Itself in Its own glory.

Who has not attained tranquility or is corrupt,
Who has not turned away
From the brief satisfactions of this world
And attained stillness of mind,
Such a person cannot know the Self,
Though learned beyond compare.

Ah! Who indeed can truly know that Self
Before which even the highest born are brought low –
Before which death itself is reduced to nothing?

Yama continued,

In the heart of each person there are two desires:

The desire to know and partake of the world,

And the desire to know and be absorbed by the ultimate Reality.

Nachiketas, think of it like this –

Imagine that the Self is seated in the back of a chariot.

The body is the chariot and awareness is the driver.

Think of the reins the driver is holding as the mind.

The senses are the horses that those reins lead to,

And the world and its many objects

Are the terrain the chariot moves along.

The Self, when it is in harmony with the body, mind and senses,

Is the enjoyer of the world and the doer of all actions.

So say the wise.

The foolish

Have minds that are scattered everywhere,

With senses that race after everything,

Like horses with the bit between their teeth.

They are unlike the wise,

Whose awareness grasps the mind firmly,

Guiding the senses along the rocky pathway of the world

Like an alert charioteer.

However, one who fails to remember
The presence of that radiant Self in the heart of the chariot,
Who becomes careless and corrupt,
Cannot reach the goal
That the Self directs the chariot towards.

The driver who remains present to that Presence,
Who is mindful and true,
Will go beyond birth and death.

More powerful than the senses
Are the desires that compel them,
More powerful than the desires
Is the mind that formulates them,
More powerful than the mind
Is the awareness which organizes it,
And more powerful than the awareness is the Self.

Though present deep within all things
That ultimate Reality
Appears not to be there at all.
But it is seen by those
Who have eyes for the profound.

The sincere seeker should inhibit speech

And let it be absorbed into the mind.
Then inhibit the activity of the mind
And let it be absorbed into the awareness.
Then let the awareness itself be offered to the Self –
And let the Self absorb it.
Thus, finally, the Self will merge with the ultimate Reality.

Arise! Awake!
You have had your three wishes – now use them.
But beware: even the wise poets say
This path is as narrow and sharp as a razor's edge.

The only way to be delivered from the jaws of death
Is by seeking out That which is
Without taste, touch, sound or color,
Which time cannot decay,
Which is beginningless and endless.
That which is ever present
Yet beyond reach of the awareness,
That from which even awareness is born.

The story of Nachiketas in which Yama gives this immortal teaching is a liberating tale. Whoever recounts it to others will have glory bestowed on them.

Yama continued,

The Self of all makes the senses flow outward,

Therefore one seeks outside of oneself.

Only the wise,

Seeking the immortal amidst mortality,

Turn their gaze away from the world

And look inward –

To find the Self.

The foolish rush out into the world,

Reaching for all that they see,

Getting caught again and again

In the snares of death.

The wise cease looking for the real

In the direction of the unreal.

For That, by which we

See all colors,

Taste all flavors,

Smell all fragrances,

Hear all sounds,

And feel the touch of our beloved,

That is the Self.

In truth, This is That which Nachiketas seeks.

That is the ultimate Reality

That must be attained while you have a body.

It is That which will make you free.

It is not in the ordinary field of vision,

Nor is it seen with the eye.

But when the mind is stilled

And the awareness focused

The Self within the heart will reveal

Its transcendent nature,

And It will make you free.

Let the five senses

And the mind they serve become still.

Let awareness itself

Cease all activity and become watchful.

Then you will have begun your journey

On the highest path.

This is Yoga.

But beware: remain ever vigilant,

For even this state of Yoga can ebb and flow.

Remember always –

Not with my speech,

Not with my eyes,

Nor even with my mind
Will that Self be reached.
It will declare Itself to me
Only in my stillness.

One hundred and one rivers
Flow from the heart in all directions.
Only one – the shining way –
Will take you upward beyond yourself
To that Self of all
And the realization of immortality.

That Inner Being is there
Present in the hearts of all.
Bring all that you are before That:
Draw It out as you would
A shaft from the center of a reed.
Know this pure and immortal Truth.
Indeed, know this pure and immortal Truth.

What then happened to Nachiketas? Nachiketas came to the realm of death free from vice and virtue, and free also from desire and ignorance. The teaching given by Yama took Nachiketas through the final Yoga to merge with the Self. Not only Nachiketas, but all those who choose the path that Nachiketas chose, attain the Self.