

## Study of Katha Upanishad

Before we begin the study of Katha Upanishad proper, we need quite a bit of an introduction. We need to study Katha Upanishad in the light of Swami Vivekananda's thoughts. Without studying Swamiji's explanation of the Katha Upanishad, if we jump directly into the Shankara Bhashya, there is the danger of getting lost in the maze of Sanskrit grammar.

### **Study to be based on Swamiji's thoughts:**

Most often, our study of the Upanishads and their Bhashya by Acharya Shankara ends up frustrating us. This is because of three main reasons: Firstly, Shankara's style of exposition is archaic. Today, his style of explaining Upanishadic thought, or any school of thought for that matter, is not popular. It has changed. Philosophical discussion today is no longer based on rules of Hindu Logic or Nyaya. This does not reduce his importance one single bit in the field of Indian philosophy. There is, even today, no dearth of people who dedicate themselves to the rigor required in studying the commentaries written by Shankara. But, most of us cant. And yet, the philosophical content of the Upanishads is invaluable for us. Secondly, the language is alien to us. The Upanishad is in Sanskrit. The explanation by Shankara (or even the other commentators, for that matter) is also in Sanskrit. So, the study ends up as confusion confounded. Thirdly, and most importantly, the objections that Shankara raises have, for the most part, lost relevance today. During his time, the objections were mainly from Buddhism, and from the other five *darshanas* or classical schools of Hindu philosophy (*Sankhya-Yoga*, *Nyaya-Vaisheshika*, and *Purva Mimamsa*). The world-view Shankara had to contend with was entirely different from the one prevalent today. But this does not mean that the conclusions drawn by Shankara in his expositions of the Upanishads, known as Advaita Vedanta, are wrong. There is a need to expound the Upanishads in modern idioms, subjected to modern rational thought and logic, and derive the same rock-solid conclusions that Shankara did so beautifully.

We need to understand the main schools of thought that are relevant in society today. Then, we need to translate the original Upanishad in English and understand their thoughts. In our endeavor, we shall come to realize that the English language is woefully deficient in dealing with the thoughts in the Upanishads. Many terms used in the Upanishads have no equivalents in English. We shall have to struggle to squeeze out the meaning of such terms from the original Sanskrit. In doing this, Shankara Bhashya is indispensable. And then, we need to establish by logical argument that the Upanishadic thought is the right perspective over the alternate perspectives offered by all the other schools of thought prevalent in society today. Swamiji has done all these three things for us. '*Realization*' and '*Unity in diversity*' lectures of Swamiji's Jnana Yoga are entirely based on Katha Upanishad. We will summarize these two lectures and understand what Swamiji has to say about this Upanishad. This will help us in understanding the Upanishad properly.

Our endeavor will be to understand the Katha Upanishad, mainly. But in doing so, we shall try to lay the groundwork for understanding any of the other ten principal Upanishads, and indeed the Advaita Vedanta philosophy itself. This extended article is therefore meant for the serious student of Advaita Vedanta, in the light of Swami Vivekananda's ideas.

### **Conversation mode of instruction:**

Like all other Upanishads<sup>1</sup>, Katha Upanishad also is in the form of a conversation between two persons. One of them is a sincere spiritual seeker and the other is a spiritually-realized soul. All spiritual instruction, all philosophical discussions have happened in this conversation mode in ancient India. That has been the Hindu tradition. That is why you find all the Upanishads in that mode, the Bhagavad Gita in that mode, all the Tantras in that mode, all the Puranas in that mode, and even today, genuine spiritual teachers still adopt this mode for dissemination of their thoughts and instructions. For instance, The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. The modern method of philosophical discussion, however, is lectures and articles. We find Swamiji adopting this modern method with great efficiency.

There is a fundamental difference in these two modes of exchanging ideas. Context is very important in the conversation mode. When two people talk between themselves, there is generally a past history to that interaction. There were things they had said to each other in the past. In the background of those conversations, the present conversation will be held. We will need knowledge of the past discussion in order to clearly understand what is being discussed now. Lectures and articles are more context-free; in the sense, there is rarely any reference to past interactions. In fact, lectures and articles are one-sided; there is therefore no past in this case. There are nuances in conversations that are absent in lectures and articles. So, if we wish to clearly understand the line of thought developed and presented in the Upanishads, we should be able to grasp and follow these nuances. We should be aware of, and recall appropriately, the references to past discussions. Shankara does an amazing job in revealing these connections at the relevant places in his Bhashya. In fact, that is one reason why Shankara's Bhashya is still in use, even though the arguments he raises have all but lost relevance.

Another very important and interesting feature of the conversation mode is iteration of ideas. The teacher has four or five ideas that are fundamental. The conversation mode allows for iterating these ideas over and over again, each time adding more details to those ideas. We will be seeing this aspect of presentation in the Katha Upanishad. This iteration of fundamental ideas is present in all ancient Hindu spiritual texts.

### **Past references in Upanishads:**

When we study any Upanishad, we see an interesting feature. Two people are discussing; one has asked a very deep question and another is answering it. When this person of realization is answering, he often quotes a passage from the past. This passage refers to a statement by another realized soul in the past. Some of those statements are available today in some Upanishad; some can't be found anywhere, except in the reference in the Upanishad we are studying. Why does this happen?

All Upanishads don't belong to the same period. Some are really old. Some were recorded much later. We can look upon them as chapters in a journal. Entries were made at different points of time. Who decided that certain conversations ought to be recorded? We don't know. But this much is clear. Only those conversations, that revealed a new aspect of the eternal truth, were considered worthy of recording. If someone said the same things as were already recorded, they were not recorded afresh. They were omitted. Certainly an enormous amount of discussions must have happened among all sorts of spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of the *Mandukya Upanishad*; this is more of a precis of what must have been, at one point of time, a larger book.

aspirants in India. Only once in a while would someone say something that revealed new light on spiritual matters. Those alone were recorded. We find a similar scheme followed in the *Apothegmata Patrum* of the Desert Fathers in Christian monastic history.

Take for instance the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. The Sage Yagnavalkya meets King Janaka and has a discussion. This discussion is recorded twice. The general contours of both episodes are the same, however, with some vital differences. This could be because – two different disciples of Yagnavalkya must have recorded their own versions of this conversation between their Guru and the King. We see this phenomenon in the lives of all Prophets, for instance Jesus Christ and Mohammad. We have four Gospels in the New Testament. Most points are same in these Gospels, albeit with some vital differences. Each is the version of one disciple of Jesus Christ. Same is the case with the recorders of the Hadith. Many direct disciples of Prophet Mohammad gave their own versions of what transpired in Mohammad's life, and all of them were recorded.

It is generally considered that Brihadaranyaka and Chandogya Upanishads are the oldest one. The Taittiriya Upanishad is later than these two. The other Upanishads belong to more recent times compared to these three. We find references to passages of these three Upanishads in the discussions of the later Upanishads. But the fun is – even in these oldest Upanishads, we have the realized souls referring to some statement that belonged to an even earlier period! All such references are prefixed by '*Tadapyesha sloko bhavati.*' 'Regarding this there is the following verse.' Even the oldest of the realized souls such as Yagnavalkya quotes one Vamadeva. This Vamadeva is not present in any Upanishad directly, although the Rig Veda has some startling utterances by him. But the reverence shown to him and his inspired statements regarding spirituality show that he must have been a highly spiritual soul, acclaimed as a knower of the highest truth, and whose utterances were the subject of study and discussion among subsequent generations. Before the Upanishads were recorded, there were older recordings of revealed mantras, forming a body of scripture called the Brahmana, Samhita and Aranyaka. In some of them too, we find utterances of inspired souls, which reveal the high degree of spiritual realization they had attained in their life. We have the example of Vak, the daughter of Sage Ambrani. Her utterances are recorded as the set of mantras called *Devi Sukta*. Then there is a realized soul called Trishanku, whose utterances are referred to with great reverence in the Taittiriya Upanishad. There is also that famous unknown realized soul in the Purusha Sukta claiming, '*Vedahametam purusham mahantam, Aditya varnam tamasah parasthat; tameva veditva atimrityum eti; nanyah pantha vidyate ayanaya.*' (I have known the Great Person, of golden hue, brilliant like the Sun, beyond all darkness; **knowing Him alone, one goes beyond death**; there is no other path but this.)

There is a very interesting point to be noted while studying the Upanishads – the present speaker presents his ideas as an elaboration of some previous speaker's ideas, and not as something entirely unique. We must remember that these speakers are all men of the highest realization, and not mere *speculators*. They are talking about things they have *perceived* within their own consciousness. They are prophets, each one of them. Yet, they do not claim privilege, nor credit for their ideas, thoughts and realizations, nor again do they try to isolate themselves from all past traditions and thereby claim unique authority over their followers. So, each new revelation was considered as an addition, or as an extension, to the fund of realizations already existing in humanity's treasury. Gradually, this kind of repeated addition led to the creation of a mammoth fund of spiritual knowledge and unbroken tradition. We don't

know how many centuries this development took. But we have reasons to believe that the principal eleven Upanishads all belong to a period much before the advent of Buddha.

### **Avatara:**

Buddha was a major disruption in Hindu religion, in terms of both tradition and culture. Philosophically, he was an integral part of Hinduism. When Siddhartha set out in search of the Truth, he scanned the entire northern part of inhabited India of that period and could not find one person who was a realized soul, capable of teaching him the path to Truth. That is always a troubling situation in India. This nation has centered itself around spirituality. The pillars of this nation have been the realized souls, people who have personally experienced Brahman, the *Brahmajnanis*. Although many persons may realize Brahman over a period of time, and all realized souls are equally great, we ought to make a distinction with regard to at least *two categories* of realized souls.

One is the realized soul who attains to the personal experience of Brahman, purely by his own efforts, without any help from another person. He is generally a person who was unable to become a part of a tradition which sustained life within it to produce realized souls. Over extended periods of time, this happens. Traditions lose people qualified enough to uphold the truths and methods of arriving at those truths, in their own lives. That is when we say that a tradition is lost. Now, this special kind of realized soul re-discovers the truth of Atman all over again, and all by himself. But, once he re-discovers the truth, he generally aligns himself with the hoary traditions that had existed in the past. This type of realized soul is considered the highest type since he reopens the path to enlightenment for humanity, or to put it more correctly, re-discovers the practice that leads man to his fulfilment. The second type is one who harmonizes conflicting versions of Truth concerning spiritual life. Truth is one, but its versions are infinite. And among these infinite versions of the same Truth, many are self-contradictory, and many are in conflict with many other versions. This second type of realized soul takes up the loose ends and ties them up.

The Upanishads consist of the statements and testaments made by these two categories of realized souls. India has had such a large number of *Brahmajnanis* in its history that not every realized soul is considered as a change-maker, as a spiritual leader worthy of being inducted into the 'Upanishadic Hall of Fame', so to speak.<sup>2</sup> But, no matter how great a Brahmajnani's contribution was to spirituality, he invariably connected his actions and words to the collective contributions of the past Brahmajnanis. We find this breaking away from the past, claiming a sort of monopoly and copyright over one's own contributions to spirituality for the first time in the Buddha. Although when Buddha did this, it seemed fresh and had a ring of novelty to it; its long term effect on the body-politic of Hindu religion was devastating. It brought about a schism in Hindu religion. What started out as Hinduism, ended up creating a new religion, which was inimical to the mother religion. Much later, when the then leaders of Hindu religion realized this debilitating effect of Buddha's actions on their religion, they were forced to co-opt him back into the Hindu religion as just one more realized soul, albeit a really powerful one. They coined a new term for co-opting him. They called him an Avatara, an incarnation of God. Since he wasn't the 1<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Complete Works: Vol-3: Lectures from Colombo to Almora: *The Sages of India: The sages of India have been almost innumerable, for what has the Hindu nation been doing for thousands of years except producing sages? I will take, therefore, the lives of a few of the most brilliant ones, the epoch-makers, and present them before you, that is to say, my study of them.*

Avatara, they came up with the allegory of the Dasha Avatars of Lord Vishnu, with Buddha being just one of them, a recent one, and an extremely powerful one.

Hinduism co-opted the personality of the Buddha, but couldn't do so with his teachings. Why? Because, he never spoke in Sanskrit, the lingua-franca of religion. Hinduism's dependency on tradition is phenomenal. There are two sides to orthodoxy and traditions. One side is that something really valuable is protected against inimical forces by the strong walls of tradition. The flip side is that new entrants are filtered out mercilessly; new blood is not infused easily; by the time new entrants are sufficiently trained in the traditions by passing through time-tested rituals, they lose all novelty, all creativity and become conformists. Anyway, Hinduism was fluid enough to have absorbed the Buddha into its main body by creating a new term called 'Avatara'.

When we look at the history of Hindu spiritual thought, we find first the Vedas with innumerable Rishis, discovering various mantras, each meant for a specific purpose. A very few among these Rishis made startling claims about their personal realizations. Their claims, no matter how shocking they must have been to people of that age, were dutifully recorded. Thus we have one Vamadeva claiming that he was Manu, the 1<sup>st</sup> born of the Universe. Then we have the lady Vak claiming that she is the mother of the Universe, responsible for whatever happens in this and all the worlds. Then there came that amazing Rishi, whose name we do not know, who discovered the set of mantras called 'Purusha Sukta'. In the course of the Sukta, he makes an incredible claim that he has perceived, directly and not by inference, the Purusha, the Supreme Being, and that by so perceiving Him, he himself has gone beyond death.

Hindu spiritual history seems to have given credence to any person, of good moral and social standing, claiming to have discovered a mantra or a set of mantras, meant to achieve one of the innumerable goals that men aspire for. Their claims were all recorded in the Vedas. Gradually, we see a shift in the criterion applied for recording the claims. It seemed, as if, they had a sufficient body of potent mantras to achieve anything and everything under the sun and the moon. Now, only those claims were recorded that spoke about the Ultimate Reality, about having perceived that Truth directly, about the specific practices that could lead one to such a super-sensuous realization. Thus, after a certain period of time, discovery of sundry mantras were dropped from the criterion for being considered worthy of recording, and only discoveries related to Atman and Brahman were recorded. This must have gone on for many centuries. Thus grew a huge amount of literature known as Upanishads. We must note one very important feature in all this. The later rishis of the Upanishads did not claim to be different from the rishis of the Vedas, the discoverers of sundry mantras, but preferred to align themselves more with the types of Vamadeva and Vak. In fact, they went to great lengths to establish linkages between what they had to say and what was already said in the past, and were recorded in the Vedas. Thus, every Rishi of the Upanishad strove to remain a part of the tradition, the *parampara*.

This is very important for our study. Why? Fundamentally, these Upanishadic Rishis were all rediscovering the lost path to Brahman. Over time, what was found out and established by one Rishi, in the field of Brahmanvidya, would get lost. The path would get lost. So a new Rishi would arrive and rediscover the path to Brahman all over again. We believe that this rediscovery can be done only by a special soul called Ishwara. That soul takes birth again and again, whenever the path to Brahman is lost to mankind. So, basically, each time, this special soul '*stumbles*' upon the Truth. But, having '*stumbled*' upon the Truth, he very quickly establishes links with the past traditions of spiritual philosophy and

spiritual practices. If the necessity of ‘stumbling’ upon Truth were not there, Ishwara would not incarnate as a man in this world. The very purpose of his Avatara is to open up a path to God for struggling mankind. But, if the Avatara does not link himself and his spiritual message as well as spiritual practice to the past traditions, mankind sees the birth of a new religion. As history has taught us, every such birth of a new religion is a ticking time-bomb that explodes when it comes in contact with the rest of the world. So, to sum-up the situation, we need Ishwara to take birth once in a while so that he can rediscover lost paths to God, and energize spiritual life of human beings. But we don’t want Ishwara in his new Avatar to claim independence for his discoveries in religion; we want him to completely align himself with all the past spiritual traditions existing in the world.

Anyway, we have followed the development of Hindu spiritual thought up to the Upanishads. Then a time came when the Upanishads too grew into a humungous form. That is when that special soul, Ishwara, took birth as Krishna. During that Avatara, he must have taken a decision to the effect that no more additions will be done to the Vedas or their later chapters, the Upanishads. He had brought along with him that other special type of realized soul, the Acharya, in the form of Vyasa. He must have directed Vyasa to freeze the Vedas and the Upanishads in an ‘as-is-where-is’ condition. Further, he must have asked him to summarize, categorize and synopsise the spiritual knowledge pertaining to Atman and Brahman available in the Upanishads. Vyasa did this in the form of the Brahma Sutras. During his own life time, Krishna himself made another major contribution to Hindu spiritual thought by harmonizing the conflicting ideas existing then in the world. This became the famous Bhagavad Gita. Note that, keeping in line with his own decision to stop any further additions into the Upanishads, Krishna’s own message was preserved separately, and not added into any Upanishad. It is extremely important for us to note that although Krishna discontinued the practice of adding new spiritual ideas into a common body of spiritual literature, he nevertheless remained an integral part of the past tradition. But, Buddha, who came later, failed to do that. Although Buddha was an Avatara, of the same stature of Krishna and all the Upanishad Rishis, he failed to align himself with the past tradition and hence ended up forming his own sect. We do not want to enter into the controversy of whether this happened due to Buddha, or due to his disciples’ ignorance, or due to social conditions prevailing in India at that time. But a great seed of future problems was sown by Buddha’s breaking away from the past.

What we need to understand for our study of the Upanishads is that all the great rishis whose statements have been recorded in the various Upanishads are all Avataras. We saw two special categories of *Brahmajnanis* a little while ago. Now, the 1<sup>st</sup> category is technically called ‘Avatara’, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> category is technically called ‘Acharya’. And one of the abiding beliefs of Hindus is that there is one soul, one person, who takes birth in various times as the ‘Avatara’. No such specific belief exists regarding the Acharyas. The idea of the Avatara and Acharya is roughly as follows:

Due to passage of time, even though strong traditions exist, people lose the art and science of realizing Brahman.<sup>3</sup> When literally no one exists in the world, who knows the path to realizing Brahman,

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<sup>3</sup> Complete Works: Vol-6: Writings: Prose & Poems: *Hinduism & Sri Ramakrishna*

This social phenomenon is called ‘*Dharma-glaani*’ in Sanskrit. So, whenever *Dharma-glaani* occurs in society, Ishwara takes birth as a human being. This is the Hindu belief. This is not merely a wishful thinking among the Hindus. The Hindu history validates this assertion. This idea was expressed by Swami Vivekananda when he said, “*But when by the process of time, fallen from the true ideals and rules of conduct and devoid of the spirit of renunciation, addicted only to blind usages, and degraded in intellect, the descendants of the Aryans failed to appreciate even the spirit of these Puranas etc. which taught men of ordinary intelligence the abstruse truths of the Vedanta*”

then this particular soul takes birth. Through his own efforts, he hews a new path to realizing Brahman, and opens that path for everyone and sends out invitations to all interested souls to enter that path. He is the Avatara. In between the Avataras, some special souls appear in this world, who clarify confusions and misconception regarding the spiritual ideals and spiritual paths, resolve conflicts of ideas and establish harmony among the paths and the goals. These special souls are the Acharyas. These Avataras and Acharyas generally appear with their own kindred souls and form teams, through which a formidable spiritual impetus is given to society. In some cases, we find the same person performing both activities – rediscovering Yoga, thereby reopening the doors to Brahmajñana, and harmonizing the conflicting philosophical ideas related to Brahmavidya. It is our contention that Nachiketa was such a person. We shall clarify our position in this regard presently.

### **Upanishad: voice of the Avataras**

India has regularly seen the appearances of Avataras from time immemorial. Until the advent of the Krishna, the utterances of these Avataras were recorded as Upanishads. These very special souls would experience a state of consciousness known as Samadhi. In fact, every Brahmajñani, even though he is not Ishwara-incarnate, will experience Samadhi. People were highly enamored with these Avataras for their ability to experience Samadhi. Samadhi is super-sensuous perception. India's history is replete with innumerable instances of persons having attained Samadhi. As a result, Indians have now equated true religion with ability to perceive Reality in a super-sensuous state. Belief is not religion. Customs and traditions are not religion. Philosophical speculation is not religion. Samadhi alone is religion.

As we have repeatedly mentioned, India has been blessed to have realized souls being born in this land time and again. The presence of a realized soul is a ground-shattering for those around him. Samadhi is a highly disruptive experience even on a beholder. India has valued these realized souls very greatly. Brahma-vidya has always existed in this culture. But history informs us that periodically this knowledge was lost. Statements of realized souls describing their personal experience continued to exist, but people could not make sense out of them. Once in a while, a blessed soul would appear who would personally

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*in concrete form and diffuse language and appeared antagonistic to one another on the surface, because of each inculcating with special emphasis only particular aspects of the spiritual ideal –*

*And when, as a consequence, they reduced India, the fair land of religion, to a scene of almost infernal confusion by breaking up piecemeal the one Eternal Religion of the Vedas (Sanatana Dharma), the grand synthesis of all the aspects of the spiritual ideal, into conflicting sects and by seeking to sacrifice one another in the flames of sectarian hatred and intolerance —*

*Then it was that Sri Bhagawan Ramakrishna incarnated himself in India, to demonstrate what the true religion of the Aryan race is; to show where amidst all its many divisions and offshoots, scattered over the land in the course of its immemorial history, lies the true unity of the Hindu religion, which by its overwhelming number of sects discordant to superficial view, quarrelling constantly with each other and abounding in customs divergent in every way, has constituted itself a misleading enigma for our countrymen and the butt of contempt for foreigners; and above all, to hold up before men, for their lasting welfare, as a living embodiment of the Sanatana Dharma, his own wonderful life into which he infused the universal spirit and character of this Dharma, so long cast into oblivion by the process of time.*

*In order to show how the Vedic truths – eternally existent as the instrument with the Creator in His work of creation, preservation, and dissolution – reveal themselves spontaneously in the minds of the Rishis purified from all impressions of worldly attachment, and because such verification and confirmation of the scriptural truths will help the revival, reinstatement, and spread of religion – the Lord, though the very embodiment of the Vedas, in this His new incarnation has thoroughly discarded all external forms of learning. That the Lord incarnates again and again in human form for the protection of the Vedas or the true religion, and of Brahmin-hood or the ministry of that religion — is a doctrine well established in the Puranas etc.*

*The waters of a river falling in a cataract acquire greater velocity, the rising wave after a hollow swells higher; so after every spell of decline, the Aryan society recovering from all the evils by the merciful dispensation of Providence has risen the more glorious and powerful – such is the testimony of history.*

*After rising from every fall, our revived society is expressing more and more its innate eternal perfection, and so also the omnipresent Lord in each successive incarnation is manifesting Himself more and more.*

*Again and again has our country fallen into a swoon, as it were, and again and again has India's Lord, by the manifestation of Himself, revived her.*

experience Samadhi afresh, and reopen this path of Brahma-vidya. Whenever this happened, we got a new Upanishad. Yajnavalkya seems to have been such a person. When he appeared, people would keep talking about Brahman but no one knew how to attain Brahman. He reopened the path. Not just Yajnavalkya, each one of the Rishis in the Upanishads was such a person.

Samadhi does not occur whimsically in a person. There is a highly standardized and calibrated procedure that leads to Samadhi. This procedure is called Yoga. Just as the common Indian has always known that a higher state of consciousness called Samadhi exists, so also has he commonly known that Yoga practices alone lead to Samadhi. Conditions need to be followed in letter and in spirit. India has all along very safely protected this science of experiencing Samadhi. But no matter how hard India has tried, every once in a while, people entrusted with the duty of preserving this science, fail to do so. And the science of spiritual practice, Yoga, gets lost, or hidden under practices that are performed mechanically, without understanding why it had to be done. In other words, it gets lost under a heavy layer of superstition. The Avatars and Acharyas appear at regular intervals and revive this Yoga or the science of spiritual practices, apparently without any external help. We saw Buddha do that; we can also see the various speakers in the Upanishads do that. Thus, we need to recognize the voice of the Avatara in the Katha Upanishad.

Now, who is the Avatara in this Upanishad? There are only two persons featured there – Nachiketa and Yama. Nachiketa is the Avatara featured in this Upanishad. Yama is Nachiketa's own inner voice, his own higher mind. Unless understood in this sense, Nachiketa 'going physically' to meet the 'God of Death' doesn't make sense. A very grand idea, a very subtle idea has been put in a highly poetic, extremely appealing manner in this Upanishad. Even when a physically real person instructs a disciple through spoken word, the disciple's own inner voice awakens and instructs him in the path of Yoga. We see this vital psychological phenomenon depicted in the Chandogya Upanishad too, in the case of Satyakama Jabala, who received instructions about *Brahmavidya* from birds and animals. Therefore, what we see in Nachiketa is a validation of the Biblical dictum 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' Not only is it 'see God', we can also extrapolate the idea and safely say, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall receive adequate instructions from within, and then, they shall see God.'

### **Yoga: the art & science of realizing Brahman**

Man has come to terms with the fact that most of the important inventions and discoveries that have changed the course of history have been serendipitous. Creativity has always been serendipitous. *Brahmajnana*, however, is not possible to achieve serendipitously. One who does not possess a unique set of qualifications can never achieve *Brahmajnana*. Merely possessing this set of qualifications is not enough. Equipped with those pre-requisites, he will have to undergo a series of spiritual practices. The minutiae of these practices have infinite variety, but they have to conform to some general principles. This set of general principles governing spiritual practice is called Yoga.

Take the case of any skill; over a period of time, if people don't practice the skill properly, we lose it. Take for instance the technology of sending astronauts to moon. Way back in the 1960s, USA developed the requisite technology to send a manned mission to moon. Then for over five decades, nobody worked on that technology. Consequently, today, when USA wants to send another manned mission to moon, there are no trained people available who can repeat the achievement. Scientists are now re-discovering the technology and skills required for achieving it. Same is the case with *Brahmajnana*. If



the link of passing on the skill of Yoga is broken, if competent aspirants don't pick up the techniques of Yoga from expert Gurus, the entire technique is lost. That is when an Avatara takes birth. Then, picking up the bits and pieces of Yoga extant in the world, he reopens the path to *Brahmajnana*. It appears as though he reinvents the wheel. In the Katha Upanishad, that is what Nachiketa does. The Yoga that results in *Brahmajnana* was discovered afresh by him. That is what led to people of that period to record his words. And that is what led subsequent generations to revere his recorded words as Upanishad.

Nachiketa achieves one more important task in his life. He takes up the loose ends of the philosophy of *Brahmajnana* that existed in the world till that time, and harmonized them into a systematic philosophy, without any internal conflicts in the philosophy. We saw that whenever this happened, people gave great importance to the resulting harmonized ideas, elevating it to the level of 'Scripture'. Thus, Katha Upanishad, as a harmonization of philosophical ideas on the one hand, and as the utterance of an Avatara on the other, occupies a very important position in Hindu spiritual literature. So, when we study any Upanishad, we need to look out for the following points: What is the unique philosophical idea that the Avatara is presenting? What is the Yoga he is prescribing? What harmonization of philosophical ideas has been achieved? With regard to Katha Upanishad, we shall take up these questions one after the other. First of all, we will look into the harmonization of philosophical ideas achieved by the Avatara in the Katha Upanishad.

### **Death & Immortality:**

In the Katha Upanishad, a great philosophical conflict gets resolved. The conflict is regarding death. Let us look a little closer at this amazing problem that had arisen in the philosophical circles in India during that period.

Death has always baffled man. We do not understand death. We do not understand why it happens, how it happens or even when it happens. But about one thing, we have always been sure – it *will* happen to everyone. Now, this question about death has been one of the starting points of philosophy. Interestingly, Swami Vivekananda observes that Hindu philosophy began with the question of life, and not death. Hindu philosophy began with the question – who created this world? Many answers were put forth. All of those answers suffered from one major defect. They could at best go up to a Creator, the anthropomorphic God, the Personal God. Such an answer could explain human existence, it could explain the world experienced by human beings, but it was not a rational answer for explaining *all* existence. Existence is not merely human. Existence is universal. It is human, animal, inanimate, and much beyond. Swamiji continues his observation and says that when faced with this problem, the Hindu philosophers shifted their position and started asking a different set of questions – what is man? Who am I? What makes a man live? Why does a man die? Swamiji says that the Hindu philosophers started asking these questions because they understood that all understanding they can ever have is from a human point of view. It is impossible to understand all of existence. They therefore decided, 'let us at least understand the human phenomenon.' While trying to understand the human phenomenon, those ancient Hindu philosophers, who were also spiritual aspirants, reached the very core of the human being. And what they perceived there, at the core of their own being, solved all their philosophical queries. What they found there answered their queries about this world, about existence, about the human being i.e. about themselves, and most importantly, about the phenomenon of life and death.

There is an allegation made against Hindu philosophy that it is dark; that it is obsessed with death. We believe that this is wrong. Hindu philosophy has never been obsessed with death or misery. It was Buddha who was fixated on suffering, misery and death. If anything, the Hindu philosophers have obsessed over immortality and Bliss, over what lies beyond life & death and beyond suffering & misery.

Anyway, let us attempt to understand the contribution of Nachiketa in this important subject. From time immemorial, Hindus have believed that everything does not end with death. Even when a man dies, something remains. They gave it a name. They called it '*Jiva*'. This *Jiva* collects all mental impressions gained during its life in the human body (called *samskaras*), and also all the fruits of actions (called *karmaphalas*) accrued during its life in the human body. Later philosophy clarified that these were actually not two different things, but that they were one and the same. However, we need not enter into that detail here, because when Nachiketa was grappling with the problem of what happens after death, the general belief was that there were two things that the *Jiva* would collect when a man died. Having collected both these things, the *Jiva* would start manufacturing a new body for renewed life. What sort of body would be created (whether it would be human or sub-human or super-human) and where that new body would come to life would be determined by the total resultant of both the impressions and the *karmaphalas*. This was an accepted belief. There was no doubt about this belief. Of course, no one knew if this actually happened. This was, truly speaking, a very bold speculation. But, it made complete sense to a rational being. Hence, the problem of death was *almost* solved, in a rational way in Hindu philosophy.

A major disruption in this belief system arose from the *Brahmajnanis*. These realized souls made some startling claims about having gone beyond death, even while they were living within their present human body. These testaments of living people, these *Brahmajnanis*, created a conflict with the general understanding of death among the Hindu philosophers. While the *Jiva* leaves the human body upon death, collecting with it both the *samskaras* and *karmaphalas*, and creates its new body, in the case of all human beings, there was a new fact that was in direct conflict with this belief. So, when Nachiketa asks the question, "There is this doubt about a man when he is dead: Some say that he exists; others say that he does not. This I should like to know, taught by you", we can safely assume that he is not asking about death of ordinary souls, but about the death of *Brahmajnanis*. This is because, as we just saw, regarding the death of ordinary people, there was general consensus. Men die. Body falls down lifeless. Something within that body, the abstracted principle of life, called *Jiva* left the body with its bundle of collectibles and went about creating a new body for itself. But, a *Brahmajnani* claims that he has gone beyond death even while living in this human body. And, one fine day, he too dies. His death is an enigma. What happens to the *Jiva* in him when he dies? He has no *samskaras*. He has no *karmaphalas*. So, when his body falls down lifeless, what does his *Jiva* do? What does it collect? Where does it go?

Take for instance the following statement of Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: *Na pretya sannjna asti iti arey bravimi iti ha uvacha yajnavalkyaha. ("After attaining Oneness, it (Jiva) has no more consciousness. This much I say to you, my dear.")* As we pointed out before, when it comes to any Upanishadic statement, it would be dangerous to try to understand it out of the context of the conversation. So we shall give the context of this statement very briefly.

Yajnavalkya was a married man. He had two wives – Maitreyi and Katyayani. He was an acclaimed *Brahmajnani*. He was following the accepted social norm of those times, i.e. after living a

householder's life; he was apportioning his wealth between his two wives, providing for their future, and was retiring to the forest, away from society, preparing to take monastic vows. When he told this to Maitreyi, she asked him, "*With all this wealth, would I attain immortality?*" Yajnavalkya explained to her that it would be absurd to think so. Then she asks him by what means she could attain immortality. Since he loved her very dearly, he explained to her that only by the realization of Brahman, unitive consciousness, could a man attain immortality. He uses many examples to drive home his point and then he drops a bomb saying, "*After attaining Oneness, it (Jiva) has no more consciousness.*" *This much I say to you, my dear.*" Naturally, Maitreyi was totally confused. Here she is expecting to learn something, by which she may attain immortality, and her dear husband (perhaps like other normal husbands!) utterly confuses her by saying that, having attained Brahman (or Oneness), *Jiva* stops being a *Jiva*; it loses its consciousness! In fact, she objects by saying that till then, what her husband had told her was fine. But this last statement had her bamboozled. Then, Yajnavalkya says something further, and those words are recorded too. But the seeds of conflict for future generations were sown with this extremely enigmatic statement. This is the 1<sup>st</sup> instance.

Then, later on, the same Yajnavalkya has a deep conversation with King Janaka. These two must have been great friends. So, before he left for Sannyasa, he wanted to bid goodbye to his dear friend the King. The King asks Yajnavalkya an interesting question. He wants to know what the light by which man lives and acts is. Naturally, Yajnavalkya replies that it is the sun. When sun shines, it is day, and hence man is active during that time. (We must remember that this discussion is happening before Edison, Faraday and Tesla!) What happens when the sun sets? Man acts by the light of the moon and stars. When they too don't shine, then by what light does he act? Man acts by the light of fire, coming out of wood or fuel. When all these lights are out? Well, then he acts by the light of his own self. The self in man is self-luminous. Then Yajnavalkya analyses the three states in which man exists – waking, dream and deep sleep. And concluding his exposition of the three states of existence, Yajnavalkya quotes an ancient text and says, "Regarding this there is the following verse: 'Because of attachment, the transmigrating self, together with its work, attains that result to which it's subtle body or mind clings. Having exhausted in the other world the results of whatever work it did in this life, it returns from that world to this world for fresh work.' Thus does the man with desires, transmigrate. But as to the man who does not desire – one who is without desire, who is freed from desire, whose desire is satisfied, whose only object of desire is the Self – **his life forces do not depart**. Being Brahman, he merges in Brahman." (*Na tasya prana utkramanti*) This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> instance of the conflict in philosophical ideas related to death.

So, naturally the question arises, where do his life forces go? His life forces do not remain in the body, for then, the realized soul would not be dead. His life forces do not go anywhere because there are no residues of samskaras and karmaphalas which can propel it to go and seek a new body. What happens then to the life forces of a realized soul when he dies? Please note the ancient text that Yajnavalkya quotes. That text summarizes the generally held belief of the Hindu philosophers about what happens after death. But, in the case of a realized soul, if his life forces do not depart, then what happens to them? This is the tricky part of the entire death question in Hindu philosophy.

In the Taittiriya Upanishad, there is a very enigmatic passage: "*If a person knows Brahman as non-existent, he himself becomes non-existent. If he knows Brahman as existent, then (knowers of Brahman) know him as existent.*" Now, Brahman is the universal Reality, the ultimate Reality. What is meant by knowing Brahman as non-existent? Surely it cannot be agnosticism or atheism, for they do not know that Brahman does not exist. Belief is not

equivalent to knowledge, in Hindu philosophy. Anyway, the Upanishad proceeds to record the following: “Thereupon the following questions of the pupil: ‘Does anyone who knows not (Brahman) attain that World after departing this life? Or does he who knows (Brahman) attain that World after departing this life?’” Again, the same question, in a slightly different form; what happens to the two types of people after death? What happens to the knower of Brahman, and what happens to one who doesn’t know Brahman, after death? The question is pretty simple and direct. Now, just look at the answer recorded in the Upanishad: [The answer:] He (Supreme Soul) desired: ‘May I be many, may I be born. He performed austerities. Having performed austerities, He created all this – whatever there is. Having created all this, He entered into it. Having entered into it, He became both the manifested and the unmanifested, both the defined and undefined, both the supported and unsupported, both the intelligent and the non-intelligent, both the real and the unreal. The Satya (the True) became all this: whatever there is. Therefore (the wise) call It (Brahman) Satya (the True).’” Nobody can ever understand the intended answer from the recorded words of the Upanishad here.

Again, in the same Taittiriya Upanishad occurs the following passage: “He who knows this (the Supreme bliss of Brahman, as described above), after dying to (i.e. withdrawing from) this world, attains the self which consists of food, attains the self which consist of the vital breath, attains the self which consists of the mind, attains the self which consists of intellect, attains the self which consists of bliss. On the above, there is also the following mantra: ‘He who knows the Bliss of Brahman, whence words together with the mind turn away, unable to reach It – he is not afraid of anything whatsoever. He does not distress himself with the thought: Why did I not do what is good? Why did I do what is evil? Whosoever knows this regards both these as Atman; indeed he cherishes both these as Atman.’ Such, indeed, is the Upanishad, the secret knowledge of Brahman.”

Just observe the ideas in this passage. What does a knower of the Supreme Bliss of Brahman do after dying? He attains one by one all the five sheaths that make up his personality, the *pancha-kosas*. Then what? He does not distress himself with the thought: Why did I not do what is good? Why did I do what is evil?

A little further on, in the same Upanishad, we find the following passage: “He who knows this, (as described above), after dying to (i.e. withdrawing from) this world, attains the self which consists of food, attains the self which consists of the vital breath, attains the self which consists of the mind, attains the self which consists of the intellect, attains the self which consists of bliss. Then he goes up and down these worlds, eating the food he desires, assuming the forms he likes. He sits, singing the chant of the non-duality of Brahman: ‘Ah! Ah! Ah! I am food, I am food, I am food! I am the eater of food, I am the eater of food, I am the eater of food! I am the uniter, I am the uniter, I am the uniter! I am the first-born of the true, prior to the gods and the navel of Immortality. He who gives me away, he alone preserves me. He who eats food – I, as food, eat him. I, (as the Supreme Lord,) overpower the whole world. I am radiant as the sun.’ Whosoever knows this, (attains Liberation). Such, indeed, is the Upanishad.”

Note the slight, but vital difference between this passage and the one quoted just before this. In both cases, after the knower of the Supreme Bliss of Brahman dies, he attains one by one the five sheaths of his personality. Then what? Then he goes up and down these worlds, eating the food he desires, assuming the forms he likes. He sits, singing the chant of the non-duality of Brahman: ‘Ah! Ah! Ah! I am food, I am food, I am food! I am the eater of food, I am the eater of food, I am the eater of food! I am the uniter, I am the uniter, I am the uniter! I am the first-born of the true, prior to the gods and the navel of Immortality. He who gives me away, he alone preserves me. He who eats food – I, as food, eat him. I, (as the Supreme Lord,) overpower the whole world. I am radiant as the sun.’ It is obvious that this chant of the non-duality of Brahman is indeed very strange!

In both these cases from the Taittiriya Upanishad, we find the word ‘dying to this world’ described as ‘withdrawing from this world’ by Shankara. But, these two descriptions of a realized soul dying are really strange and they clash with the two statements of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad that we have quoted above. We can quote some more instances like this to highlight the conflicting statements with regard to death of a realized soul from the Chandogya Upanishad and the Mundaka Upanishad too. But, these instances are sufficient to point out that when Nachiketa asked that question, “There is this doubt about a man when he is dead: Some say that he exists; others say that he does not. This I should like to know, taught by you”, he was referring to a deeply contested matter. Nachiketa was a young boy. He must have gone to school and studied these ancient and revered texts. His teachers must have been unable to resolve this conflict regarding the death of a realized soul for him. But, he, being one of those special types of persons, must have arrived at a resolution on his own. Therefore, in the course of the Upanishad, Nachiketa brings out a satisfactory resolution regarding this contentious issue.

It is against this background we must understand Swamiji’s famous statements: ‘**Meditate upon death;**’ and ‘**Love death.**’ We would be greatly mistaken to read pessimism or a morbid obsession with death into these two utterances of Swamiji. He was speaking in the background of this harmonization of philosophical ideas in the Katha Upanishad when he made those two statements.

What is the benefit in studying about the death of a realized soul? One comes face to face with the Atman, the core of man, directly by studying the death of a realized soul. That is the reason Swamiji said, ‘Meditate upon death.’ Meditate upon whose death? Upon one’s own death? That would be fearful, depressing, foolish and suicidal! That would suck the life out of life. We ought to meditate upon death as revealed in the life of a **realized** soul. That is highly revealing. That meditation will reveal the undying core of man, which is supremely beneficial to us!

## **Scheme of Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma): Brahma Jnana, Brahma Vidya & Brahma Shakti**

### **Brahma Jnana:**

As we explained before, the Vedas contain revelations. These revelations were in the form of Mantras. These mantras pertained to all requirements in life. Whatever a person needed, he or she could get it by uttering the proper mantras and performing the appropriate ritual. You need a house? You have mantras for that. You need some enemies taken care of? You need to cure yourself of some disease? You need protection against some virus? You have specific mantras for all that. You need a son? Again, mantras and rituals are there. Even minute details are taken care of! You need a physically strong son with blue eyes and curly hairs? Specific mantras and rituals are there for obtaining exactly that kind of a son! Then you had mantras regarding life after death. Is there a particular kind of world you wish to live in, after you die? Do these rituals uttering these mantras, say the Vedas.

Every once in a while, among these revelations related to mundane things of this world, you will find some Rishi revealing some mantras referring to his own true nature. We have Vamadeva saying that he himself was the First Born. You have the lady Vak saying that she is the Mother of the Universe. You have another unknown Rishi say in the Purusha Sukta that he has perceived the Purusha and that by perceiving him alone does one go beyond death. Yet another Rishi, whose name was not recorded, says that he is the Purusha associated with the Sun. Gradually, people in authority felt that we have had enough of mantras regarding obtaining things in this world and life after death. They started concentrating on

revelations concerning the true nature of man; the statements concerning ‘*Aham asmi iti*’, or ‘I am’. Thus grew a fund of knowledge concerning *Atma Jnana* or *Brahma Jnana*. Notice that the terms Brahman and Atman are synonymous and hence interchangeable. As we pointed out earlier, these revelations were always connected post-facto with the revelations in the Vedas.

The statements of the Upanishads were of two categories: those related to the true nature of man, and those related to methods of realizing that true nature within oneself. The former is called *Brahma Jnana*; and the latter is called *Brahma Vidya*. Another name for *Brahma Vidya* is ‘Yoga’.

The statements related to *Brahma Jnana* are some of the strangest statements ever made by man. They contain all superlatives; or they are self-contradictory; or they are full of negatives. Mostly, these statements are various combinations of all these types of statements.

For instance, in the *Mundaka Upanishad*, we have the following verses, describing the Atman. Just look at the **superlatives** used here: *He is the self-luminous and formless Purusha, uncreated and existing both within and without. He is devoid of prana, devoid of mind, pure and higher than the supreme Imperishable. From Him are born prana, mind, all the sense-organs, Akasa, air, fire, water and earth, which supports all. The heavens are His head; the sun and moon, His eyes; the quarters, His ears; the revealed Vedas, His speech; the wind is His breath; the universe, His heart. From his feet is produced the earth. He is, indeed, the inner Self of all beings. From Him comes the Fire whose fuel is the sun; from the moon comes rain; from rain, the herbs that grow on the earth; from the herbs, the seminal fluid which a man pours into a woman. Thus many living beings are born of the Purusha. From Him have come the Rik, the Saman, the Yajus, the Diksha, all sacrifices, the Kratus, gifts, the year, the sacrificer and the worlds which the moon sanctifies and the sun illumines. By Him are begotten the various devas, the sadhyas, men, cattle, birds and also prana and apana, rice and corn, penance, faith, truth, continence and law. From Him have sprung the seven pranas, the seven flames, the seven kinds of fuel, the seven oblations and also the seven planes where move the pranas, lying in the cave, which are seven in each living being. From Him come all the oceans and the mountains; from Him flow rivers of every kind; from Him have come, as well, all plants and flavors, by which the inner self subsists surrounded by the elements.<sup>4</sup> He who knows all and understands all and to whom belongs all the glory in the world—He, Atman, is placed in the space in the effulgent abode of Brahman.<sup>5</sup>*

In the *Kena Upanishad*, we have the following verses, describing the same Atman. Just look at the **self-contradictory** statements used here: *The eye does not go thither, or speech, or the mind. We do not know It; we do not understand how anyone can teach It. It is different from the known; It is above the unknown. Thus we have heard from the preceptors of old who taught It to us. That which cannot be expressed by speech, but by which speech is expressed—That alone know as Brahman and not that which people here worship. That which cannot be apprehended by the mind, but by which, they say, the mind is apprehended—That alone know as Brahman and not that which people here worship. That which cannot be perceived by the eye, but by which the eye is perceived—That alone know as Brahman and not that which people here worship. That which cannot be heard by the ear, but by which the hearing is perceived—That alone know as Brahman and not that which people here worship.<sup>6</sup> He by whom Brahman is not known, knows It; he by whom It is known, knows It not. It is not known by those who know It; It is known by*

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<sup>4</sup> *Mundaka Up: II.1.2-9*

<sup>5</sup> *Mundaka Up: II.2.7*

<sup>6</sup> *Kena Up: I.3-8*

*those who do not know It.* <sup>7</sup> *It moves and moves not; It is far and likewise near. It is inside all this and It is outside all this.* <sup>8</sup>

In the Mandukya Upanishad, we have the following verses, describing the same Atman. Just look at the **utterly negative** statements used here: *Turiya is not that which is conscious of the inner (subjective) world, nor that which is conscious of the outer (objective) world, nor that which is conscious of both, nor that which is a mass of consciousness. It is not simple consciousness nor is It unconsciousness. It is unperceived, unrelated, incomprehensible, un-inferable, unthinkable and indescribable. The essence of the Consciousness manifesting as the self in the three states, It is the cessation of all phenomena; It is all peace, all bliss and non-dual. This is what is known as the Fourth (Turiya). This is Atman and this has to be realized.* <sup>9</sup>

We can't fail to notice one most interesting thing regarding these descriptions of the Atman. We know so many things in this world. Nothing that we know of, corresponds to these descriptions! We may study these descriptions as many times as we want, but we will not be able to identify *anything* that we already know of, as the Atman. That is the uniqueness of Brahma Jnana. The only way to identify, and perceive the Atman is by following the *Vidyas* or the *Yogas*.

### **Brahma Vidya:**

The other category of statements refers to the various methods of realizing Atman. Although there are innumerable such *Vidyas*, or methods, or techniques, recorded in the principal eleven Upanishads, we need to reckon with three mainly. They are *Avastha-traya* method, *Pancha-kosa* method, and the method of Om. We may consider that the *Avastha-traya* method was discovered by Yajnavalkya. This deals with analyzing the three states of consciousness – waking, dream, & deep sleep – and perceiving the Atman as present in all three, apart from a state of consciousness beyond these three called the *Turiya*. Bhrgu may be considered as the discoverer of the *Pancha-kosa* method. This deals with analyzing one's own personality, identifying five different sheaths therein, with the Atman as the substratum of all these sheaths, apart from existing on its own, independent of the human personality. The Om, however, is seen right from the beginning of the Vedas. It is the main connecting link between all portions of the Vedas and the Upanishads. The way in which Om is used as a tool in Brahma-vidya is amazing. It is used to stand for everything that belongs to Brahma Jnana and Brahma Vidya. This knowledge and the technique are both contained in this Om. How? Upanishads establish this by association of ideas. We remember the various descriptions of the Atman, and the various methods of analyzing the states of consciousness or sheaths of personality; with this remembrance, we chant Om with the faith that this sound contains all that we know of Brahma Jnana and Brahma Vidya. The Upanishads developed a beautiful method for establishing this association of ideas with this sound of Om. The Upanishads say, '*Atman should be heard about, reasoned about, and meditated upon.*' We hear about the Atman from the Upanishads; we reason about its existence through our mind; then we meditate upon Atman using Om.

We may note in passing here that many of the *Vidyas* seem to be of Kshatriya origin. Take for instance the two famous instances of Mundaka and Katha Upanishads. In the Mundaka occur the

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<sup>7</sup> Kena Up: II.3

<sup>8</sup> Isa Up: 5

<sup>9</sup> Mandukya Up: 7

following two verses: *Take the Upanishad as the bow, the great weapon and place upon it the arrow sharpened by meditation. Then, having drawn it back with a mind directed to the thought of Brahman, strike that mark, O my good friend—that which is the Imperishable. Om is the bow; the atman is the arrow; Brahman is said to be the mark, It is to be struck by an undistracted mind. Then the atman becomes one with Brahman, as the arrow with the target.*<sup>10</sup> Then in the Katha Upanishad, we have the famous chariot imagery as follows: *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.*<sup>11</sup>

Anyway, now that there had been a proliferation of mantras in the Vedas, meant for life here on earth and a post-mortem life, it was decided that no further additions would be made to the Vedas. Also, there was a proliferation of ideas concerning Brahma Jnana and Brahma Vidya; hence it was decided that no further additions would be made to the Upanishads. In all probabilities, there was a long period of time in India between this decision and the arrival of Krishna. This period was uneventful except for the presence of a giant in philosophy called Kapila. He must have been of a similar stature of the Upanishad Rishis, an Avatara, for he attempted to frame the first proper philosophy called Samkhya. This Samkhya philosophy sort of provided a rational basis for understanding the statements related to Brahma Jnana in the Upanishads.

Then came Krishna and Vyasa. Both the Vedas and Upanishads were systematized by Vyasa. Krishna put his stamp on the finalization of accumulation of Brahma Jnana and Brahma Vidya. Nothing further was needed to be added to either. But, human nature is such that given a few centuries; people lose the edge in Brahma Vidya or Yoga. In fact, Krishna had already noted this periodicity in human history. Thus, when Buddha was born, there was no one among either the Brahmins or Kshatriyas who could teach him the Yoga that would lead to Brahma Jnana. Nevertheless, Buddha rediscovered Brahma Jnana and Yoga again, from first principles. As we saw before, he chose to remain unconnected to the tradition of the past, the long lineage of the Vedic & Upanishad Rishis. This was the greatest disruption for Hindu religion. We find Swami Vivekananda devoting at least 25% of his Complete Works to clarifying the position of Buddha, and his philosophy vis-à-vis Hinduism.

When the dust raised by Buddha's rebellion settled down, the leaders of the ancient Hindu religion found that the situation was really desperate. What had happened was the following: The main strains of the Upanishad knowledge and techniques were revived in a novel form by Buddha. As we saw, the Upanishadic content had these two strains – the Jnana portion and the Yoga portion. We have also seen that this dual categorization was copied by the Upanishad Rishis from the Vedic Rishis, for the Vedas too had been formed on the same framework. There is however one more extremely important

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<sup>10</sup> Mu. Up: II.2.3-4

<sup>11</sup> Ka. Up: I.3.3-9



thread in the Hindu religion. That is the concept of **Shakti** or **Power**. Existence is always associated with Power in Hindu thought. The only problem in understanding Shakti in Hindu thought is the constant change of name that the concept has undergone. That is quite natural given the innumerable forms that Power assumes in our lives.

### **Brahma Shakti:**

Shakti is present right from the earliest Vedas, in various forms such as *Sri, Rayi, Vak, Saraswati, Medha, Durga, Bhru,* and *Shraddha*. Then in the Upanishads, it takes the forms of *Pushan, Vayu, Prana, Hiranyagarbha, Avyakta, Avyakrita, Prakriti, Saguna Brahman, Savishesha Brahman,* and *Maya*. Although there are so many names, we must recognize that it is the same entity identified by all these names – the Power component of Pure Existence. We may contrast this constant name change for Power with the variety of names used for Existence in the Vedas and the Upanishads. Existence is known by only three names during this entire period – Purusha, Brahman, and Atman. If you count the vague pronouns ‘Sah (He) & Tat (It)’, we have just five different names for Existence! Buddhism brought about a major dichotomy in this line of thought. Their philosophy considered Pure Existence alone by completely ignoring Power associated with Pure Existence. Hindu religious thought has always combined Brahma Jnana, Brahma Vidya, and Brahma Shakti together. When Buddhism framed its philosophy in India, it considered only the Jnana and Vidya aspects, and ignored the Shakti component altogether.

We must note here one important thing: There is a clear division between what Buddha taught when he was alive in flesh and blood, and what developed later on as Buddhist philosophy. Buddha taught the most practical aspects of Hinduism, how we must not obsess on the transcendental Brahman, but must learn to deal with the present world with compassion. So, in fact, Buddha dealt mainly with Shakti, strictly speaking. But, later Buddhist scholars, in trying to create a philosophical framework for his teaching, ended up with an alternate version of only the Jnana aspect of the Upanishad, with a smattering of the Yoga aspects. In the philosophy of Buddhism, Shakti was entirely ignored.

Therefore, the Hindus, who survived the Buddhist onslaught, came up with the Tantras entirely dedicated to Power. The Tantras came up as a balancing act for the Buddhist version of Hindu religious thought. Pure Existence had to be balanced with Power. With the birth and growth of Tantras, people who had considered Buddhist religious thought as something unique and separate from Hindu Vedic-Upanishadic thought, were able to recognize that Buddhist thought was just old wine in a new bottle. Hence, nothing called ‘Buddhism’ remained separately in India, for it was absorbed back into the Mother Religion.

Yet another area where a deep vacuum was felt in post-Buddhistic Hindu thought was in the clarity regarding Yoga. We had already seen Kapila and his formidable philosophy of Samkhya. Now, another spiritual giant called Patanjali appeared and provided a most scientific system of Yoga to complete the incomplete picture. The Vedas and the Upanishads had considered Jnana, Vidya and Shakti together. Buddhism separated these three strands and their thought survived as Jnana alone. Tantras supplied the Shakti strand to Buddhism’s Jnana, and Kapila-Patanjali supplied the Yoga strand and completed the original picture of Hindu religious thought. When we say they completed the picture, what we mean is – this brought back Hinduism to the state where Krishna-Vyasa had left it. With these developments, the fracture that had occurred in Hindu religious thought was almost repaired, so to speak.

We draw the attention of our readers to an interesting fact. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna contains innumerable references to the identity of Brahman and Shakti. In every entry in that book, we find Sri Ramakrishna saying that Brahman and its Shakti are inseparable. If we do not understand this history of Hindu religious thought, we will be at a loss to make sense of why Sri Ramakrishna makes such a big issue of this Brahman-Shakti identity. Again, when we read the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, we find him speaking again and again on how Buddha was a Hindu, how Buddhism is Hinduism, how Buddha tried to reform Hinduism, how Buddhism is a fulfilment of Hinduism. Sri Ramakrishna reiterating the Brahman-Shakti identity and Swami Vivekananda reiterating amalgamation of Buddha with Hindu religious thought – these two are the same.

As a very pertinent aside, we wish to point out that it is only by reading Hindu religious history in this light that we can make sense of two important events in Swami Vivekananda's life. When the young Naren achieved Nirvikalpa Samadhi in Cossipore Garden House, the news was brought to Sri Ramakrishna. Such an event would be the high-water mark in any Guru's life; one's own disciple attaining the highest spiritual experience! But, Sri Ramakrishna brushed it aside saying, "Let him remain in that state for some time; he has pestered me for long for that experience." But, sometime before, when the young Naren had accepted Mother Kali, this same Sri Ramakrishna had celebrated it for days! He told everyone who visited him at that time about this development; that Naren had accepted Kali. That was the high-water mark in this Guru's life! Later on, we find the young monk Swami Vivekananda approaching Pavhari Baba to learn Raja Yoga from him.

Let us not jump the gun. We will have sufficient opportunity to understand the role of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda in the history of India later on. Let us pick up the thread from where we left it last.

### **Buddha's impact on Sanatana Dharma:**

At this period of time in Hindu religious history, what we have are three separate strands of Brahma Jnana, Yoga and Shakti Tantras. That which had been one organic whole till the pre-Buddha period, now existed as three autonomous entities. One more major point of confusion reigned in this already garbled philosophical and religious atmosphere in India. That also was Buddha's 'gift', so to speak. When Buddha preached his religious ideas, he kept his message as practical as possible. In fact, he over-practicalized his message, if we may be allowed to use such a term. The Vedic & Upanishadic religion demanded great rigor of its students. In his unprecedented fervor to bring the goods of religion to everyone, Buddha relaxed that rigor. He emphasized on renunciation and service alone, at the cost of developing and sustaining a spiritual culture among his followers. He said, 'Don't bother about Atman and Brahman or Yoga and Shakti. You are alive. You are in misery. Get rid of misery. Help others get rid of misery.' He never bothered to specify what remained when misery vanished. Philosophy was never given importance by Buddha. He was an ever practical religious teacher. But, you can't keep religious teaching hanging in the air, or in a vacuum. Religious teaching has to be couched in a deep culture consisting, in the very least, of philosophy, rituals, mythology, architecture, and music. Later Buddhist scholars sprang up who made a mess of the entire thing. Neither could these Buddhist scholars hitch Buddha's teachings to the Jnana portion of the Upanishads, nor could they hammer out a solid philosophy based on their Prophet's teachings. Hence, the post-Buddhist period was a dark era of philosophical pandemonium.

Buddha's impact on the Hindu religion was extremely deep, and lasted long. It took an enormous effort from the Mother Religion to digest Buddha, Buddha's teachings, and the philosophy that came up in his name. One of the major effects of Buddha's influence on religion was the extreme insistence on monasticism as non-negotiable criterion for spiritual life. Records point out that the entire country got dotted with monasteries within 500 years of Buddha! The best blood of the society, both men and women, took monastic vows. How can society survive in such circumstances? Although King Ramachandra antedated Sri Krishna and Buddha, chronologically, we have reasons to believe that Rama began to be projected as an ideal for society in the post-Buddhist era. We can't fail to notice how, for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in this land, an ideal was projected for woman in the personality of Sita. The rise of Sita, as personification of Shakti, in the national consciousness was thus the 1<sup>st</sup> reaction to the post-Buddhistic rejection of Shakti.

Thus, the post-Buddhistic India had the following characteristics, from the religious point of view. We had a validation of Brahma Jnana in Buddha's life. All his utterances regarding his own state of existence, regarding his own spiritual experience under the Bodhi tree, regarding his living experience all his life, echoed the experiences of the Rishis of the Upanishads. Although the idioms, words, metaphors and the language used were very different, discerning people recognized the unmistakable similarity; hence Buddha had to be recognized as an Avatara, at the same stature as Yagnavalkya, Bhrgu, Nachiketa, Sri Krishna, and others. However, his teachings could not be easily squared with the philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads, which had been beautifully systematized by Vyasa in the Brahma Sutras. Moreover, Buddha himself had been iconoclastic in rejecting any connection with, or inspiration from the Vedas and Upanishads.

### **Caste system & the Sangha:**

One of the reasons for this peculiar development had to do with Buddha's dynamics with the caste system. While the Vedas and Upanishads knew how to operate within the caste system, with the Sudras engaged in manual labor, the Vaishyas taking care of economics, leaving the Kshatriyas and Brahmanas to serious spiritual endeavors, Buddha rejected this system entirely. He saw this system as exploitative. He was the 1<sup>st</sup> egalitarian in the world. How did he break down the immense caste system? He gave people a viable alternative. He created the 1<sup>st</sup> known organization in the world, in the form of the 'Sangha'. Anyone could become a member of his Sangha, and become qualified to receive the highest spiritual instructions. In the old system, a man had to grow up the social ladder in order to qualify for the higher instructions, for Brahma Jnana. If anyone was not capable of calming down one's mind, and was incapable of abstract thought, he or she was barred from entry into the higher life. There was a beautiful system of Varna-Ashrama to take care of their development. In due course, they had to develop themselves, manifest requisite qualities, and the system did have opportunities for co-opting such people into the Kshatriya or Brahmana caste and expose them to the higher life. But, Buddha must have seen the exclusivity exhibited by the Kshatriyas and Brahmanas in this process of allowing lower people into the higher circles of society, effectively barring their access to Brahma Jnana and Brahma vidya. And therefore he must have pulled down the entire caste structure and given people an alternative through his Sangha.

Since the economy in India had not diversified beyond the confines of the caste system, there was always a resistance within the country to completely abandon the caste system and adopt the organization

system of Buddha.<sup>12</sup> Although the lower castes must have adopted the Sangha in large numbers, the upper castes must have stayed put in the old system itself. Moreover, every member of the sangha was a monk. What about the married man? There is a possibility that membership in the sangha was allowed for people who had married and had then renounced their family, even as Buddha himself had done. But when we read the history of India of those times, through the eyes of Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita, we can sense a dynamic of unworthy younger people also joining the sangha, mainly because that style of life afforded them an escape from hard work, and had prestige associated with it. A simultaneous weakening of the Kshatriya caste had rendered India open to visitors from across the borders in the North-west. In the old system, such invaders or gate-crashers would have been enrolled within the caste system, and they would have had to work their way up, accruing culture in the meanwhile. The Sangha gave them a lucrative alternative of a non-hierarchical system, without many impositions of social rules and regulations. This was the social mess that followed Buddha's appearance in India.

### **Reclaiming Sanatana Dharma: the 6-part plan**

As we saw before, it was impossible to incorporate Buddha's teachings into the original Veda-Upanishad framework, but it was also simultaneously clear that he was indeed one of the old Rishis and was indeed speaking of the same Brahma Jnana. Hence a series of Buddhist scholars came up who tried to weave a unique philosophy, starting afresh, completely dissociated from the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras. So, now in order to salvage the situation, the Hindus came up with a grand plan. We do not wish to impute that some group of Hindus sat somewhere and drew up this grand **6-parts plan**. But the Hindu psyche worked it out in phases as follows, which we can gather from hindsight.

The Vishnu Purana was composed which incorporated the personality of Buddha as an Avatara. That was the **1<sup>st</sup> part**.

The personality of Sita-Ramachandra was projected as an ideal for the common man through the *Iitihasa* called Ramayana. That was the **2<sup>nd</sup> part**.

The Tantras were created to incorporate Shakti worship, which had been ignored by Buddhistic philosophy. That was the **3<sup>rd</sup> part**.<sup>13</sup>

The Kapila-Patanjali Yoga system was formulated and popularized to fulfil the need of Brahma Vidya, which had been also left in the lurch by Buddhistic philosophy. That was the **4<sup>th</sup> part**.

Buddha had clearly shown the chinks in the Indian society, because of which a huge chunk of the lower rungs of the then Indian society had enrolled itself in the Sangha, which was an alternative to the original social structure. The only incentive Buddha had given to these lower castes was access to the

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<sup>12</sup> Complete Works: Vol-5: *Questions & Answers*: Part-II: At the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Club, Boston, USA: *The caste system is opposed to the religion of the Vedanta*.

<sup>13</sup> It would be interesting to note a very important point here. Buddhistic philosophy ignored Shakti, but not Buddhistic spiritual practices. The latter incorporated Shakti in an unprecedented manner. Many of these Buddhistic practices went to the western world through the missionaries. And centuries later, these ideas fructified as the worship of Pure Shakti in the form of modern Science. Perhaps owing to the fragmentary nature of this transfer of ideas and practices, the West took up the worship of Pure Shakti, unalloyed with consciousness. Just as India took up the pursuit of Pure consciousness, unalloyed with Shakti, the West took up the pursuit of Pure Shakti, unalloyed with consciousness. Swamiji recognized this aspect of the modern Western thought. He therefore tried to wed these two approaches together. He proclaimed, "What we need is Western Science **coupled with** Vedanta..."

highest spiritual knowledge as soon as they become members of the Sangha. The Hindu leaders realized this sentiment. They came up with innumerable worship systems of the Personal God, drawing from the Vedic pantheon, and incorporating the local deities of the gate-crashing mob from across the borders. This crystallized as the cults of the Five-gods: Shiva, Shakti, Surya, Ganapathi, and Vishnu. The Hindu leaders of this period had discovered the method of creating Puranas, in place of fresh Vedas and Upanishads to provide a basis for this worship of the Personal God. But, they fulfilled the one vital requirement for anything religious in India – they linked up each one of these new developments with the Vedas, Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras. Thereby they gave authenticity to the new order of things. This worship of the Personal God by creating cults paid off for Hinduism. The lower castes were retained within the Mother Religion! The Sangha started dwindling. There never was any conscious driving out of the Buddhist Sangha from India. The membership dwindled and the old Hindu religion, armed with its new tools, re-absorbed its monasteries and members back into its fold. All the ancient temples in India are Buddhist places of worship reabsorbed into Hinduism. That was the **5<sup>th</sup> part**.

Then came Acharya Shankara who unleashed the **6<sup>th</sup> part** of the grand plan to repair the damage sustained from the Buddhistic onslaught on India and the Hindu religion.

The creation of the Vishnu Purana took care of the personality of Buddha. But the philosophy was still iffy. Were the Upanishads right? Or was Buddhist philosophy right? Acharya Shankara settled this once and for all. The philosophy of the Upanishads was right for at least three reasons.

**First:** Buddhistic philosophy was speculation. None of the Buddhist scholars had a spiritual realization of what they professed. The Upanishadic philosophy was experience; it was a higher experience no doubt, but it was fundamentally an experience. People who followed the Yoga rightly could verify it. Hence it was right.

**Second:** Buddhistic philosophy was based loosely on Buddha's words; rather, they were based on interpretations of Buddha's words. The Upanishadic philosophy was based on the records of innumerable persons, all of them of the same stature of the Buddha. Moreover, this philosophy was part of an unbroken tradition in this country. Hence the Upanishadic philosophy was right. <sup>14</sup>

**Third:** Upanishadic philosophy was rational. But the Buddhistic philosophy too was extremely rational. However, the Buddhistic philosophy had one great drawback. It was not idealistic. It could not point to anything beyond reason, in a reasonable manner. If reason cannot lead man to beyond reason, reason doesn't serve any purpose in a man's life. It is the ideal that appeals to man. And the ideal must not militate against reason. We may use reason to organize our life here and now in a wonderful way. But that would not slake the thirst of the soul, although it would satisfy the intellect to a great extent. What about that cry of the soul for the beyond? That is a universal cry. That cry has to be answered reasonably. Shankara was able to do that.

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<sup>14</sup> Now, if it was an unbroken tradition, why did Buddha have to rebel against the tradition and go back to the first principles and rediscover both the Jnana and the Vidya again? The Brahmanas will answer: 'That was because Siddhartha was an upstart. He was no Kshatriya. All Kshatriyas, worthy of name, were annihilated during Krishna's time. Thereafter, the Jnana and the Vidya remained with certain select Brahmins alone, and most of them lived in the forests, away from society. Let people come up the social ladder, show qualities of a Brahmin, and then the esoteric knowledge and technique would be given to them. Buddha had no patience with such a thing.' Buddha must have, of course, seen through the power play in the whole scheme, the constant fight between Brahmins and Kshatriyas for social dominance.

Acharya Shankara did that by writing commentaries on eleven principal Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras and surprisingly, on the Gita! That was his way of establishing connection of his philosophy with the Vedic and Upanishadic past. And he went to great lengths to establish that the Upanishads proclaim the extreme non-dualistic (Advaita) philosophy. This was again a point of contention among philosophical circles. There were highly evolved spiritual leaders in India who had experienced the Personal God. Hence that must be true too. It would not do to insist that Advaita alone was true. It would not do to insist that the Upanishads proclaimed only Advaita. One more problem that arose was that of practicality. Extreme non-dualism is not practical. It is entirely transcendental. Buddha's imprint on Hinduism was permanent; he had indelibly written on the history pages of Hinduism that religion had to be practical. It would not do to reveal a purely transcendental ideal for humanity. Hence came up many more schools of philosophy, prominent among them being the Visistadvaita of Acharya Ramanuja and the Dvaita of Acharya Madhva.

Mohammad started his new religion of Islam contemporaneously with Acharya Shankara. The Muslims invaded India and started living in this land. They brought with them an intense religion, devoid of any philosophy. The Hindu religious genius came up with a host of leaders who successfully attempted the integration of Islam in the form of Sufism, Sikhism and the already existing Bhakti cults. At last arrived the Christian missionary. At this juncture arose Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

Sri Ramakrishna discovered the harmony among the various versions of religions both within India, and from across the borders. He integrated the Jnana and Shakti within Hindu religious thought, and thus took back the Hindu religion to the pre-Buddhistic period. He integrated Christian and Islam religions with Hindu religious thought by situating it in the Advaita-Visistadvaita-Dvaita continuum. Thus the ideals represented by the philosophies of various religious thoughts were harmonized by Sri Ramakrishna. That left Swami Vivekananda to synthesize the Yoga aspects of all religious thoughts, both Indian and those from across the borders. He wrote four detailed books, one on each Yoga – Jnana, Bhakti, Raja, and Karma. So, the Jnana portion was harmonized by Sri Ramakrishna, the Yoga portion was synthesized by Swami Vivekananda, and Shakti was personified in Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi.

With the advent of Sri Ramakrishna, we thus see a total reclaiming of the Sanatana Dharma. The Brahma Jnana has been re-established on the most solid foundation of revelation, reason, and experience. The Brahma Vidya has been resuscitated in the form of the 'Practical Vedanta' and 'Synthesis of the four Yogas' by Swami Vivekananda. The Brahma Shakti has been made manifest to the world in the form of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. Thus the philosophical, practical and power-cult aspects of the Sanatana Dharma have been restored to their ancient days. That is why Swamiji used to repeatedly say that 'Satya Yuga' has again started with the advent of Sri Ramakrishna.

When Swamiji went to the West, he had no doubts about the Brahma Jnana and the Shakti aspects of Sanatana Dharma in modern times. For, he had seen clearly how Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi had fulfilled those two aspects; now remained for him the Brahma Vidya aspect. His life can be read as a relentless effort to resuscitate the Vidya or Yoga aspect again for the modern times. In the West, he was surprised to see the entire society following the Sangha framework that Buddha had experimented with in ancient India!<sup>15</sup> Everywhere in the West, Swamiji saw the wonders of organization. He saw how the

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<sup>15</sup> We deduce this important idea by collating the following statements of Swamiji:

organization, the modern avatar of the ancient Sangha, had become a tool for harnessing and channeling the immense power of the masses for unprecedented material progress. He had gone to America to learn their secret of prosperity, and if possible, to bring it to India for applying on Indian society. What he saw there shocked him, literally. That is why we see him dithering. Discerning historians must be able to discover how the concept of social organization in the form of the Sangha must have gone forth from ancient India through the Buddhist missionaries, had taken roots in the western world, and had become a boon for them, reaping immense material benefits. But India had once experimented with this alternative to caste system; and India had rejected that idea. That is why Swamiji was so apprehensive whether modern India would accept his ideas. He was basically bringing back the lost 'gift' of Buddha and, as it were, asking, cajoling, coaxing India to try it out once more. Would India listen to him? The future alone can tell.

Our study of the Katha Upanishad needs to be done in the background of these historical details.

### **Plot of Katha Upanishad:**

Vajashravas was a rich man, for sure. In one place, Swamiji calls him a king. He might have been a Brahmin too. This is a detail that has escaped available history. But he was rich, because the Upanishad starts by telling that he was conducting a Yajna called 'Vishwajit', and was giving away lots of cows, horses and livestock. Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas of those times would get married, have a couple of kids, earn lot of money by righteous means, then perform the Vishwajit Yajna, giving away all that

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Complete Works: Vol-9: *Our Mission in America*: The Indian Mirror, April 24<sup>th</sup> 1898: Now, America is perfectly a new country. It was discovered by Columbus, the Italian, and before that a prior claim is put forward by the Norwegians who say, that they have discovered the northern part of it, and then before that there is another prior claim of the Chinese, who at one time preached the noble doctrine of Buddhism in all parts of the world, and it is said that Buddhist Missionaries were also sent from India to America, and specially in Washington, where some sorts of records are still to be traced by any traveler going there.

Complete Works: Vol-8: *Epistles - 4<sup>th</sup> Series*: XXXIV: from Chicago, November, 1894 to Sri Haridas Viharidas Desai: The secret of success of the Westerners is the power of organization and combination.

Complete Works: Vol-8: *Buddha's Message to the World*: You know about his long mission, his disciples, and his organizations. You all know these things.

Complete Works: Vol-6: *Historical Evolution of India*: The Empire of Magadha was gone. Most of northern India was under the rule of petty chiefs always at war with one another. Buddhism was almost extinct except in some eastern and Himalayan provinces and in the extreme south and the nation after centuries of struggle against the power of a hereditary priesthood awoke to find itself in the clutches of a double priesthood of hereditary Brahmins and exclusive monks of the new regime, with all the powers of the Buddhistic organization and without their sympathy for the people.

Complete Works: Vol-4: *Modern India*: The voice of the ruled in the government of their land – which is the watchword of the modern Western world, and of which the last expression has been echoed with a thundering voice in the Declaration of the American Government, in the words, 'That the government of the people of this country must be by the people and for the good of the people' – cannot however be said to have been totally unrecognized in ancient India. The Greek travelers and others saw many independent small States scattered all over this country, and references are also found to this effect in many places of the Buddhistic literature. And there cannot be the least doubt about it that the germ of self-government was at least present in the shape of the village Panchayat, (Literally, 'Government by Five', in which the village-men sit together and decide among themselves, all disputes.) which is still to be found in existence in many places of India. But the germ remained forever the germ; the seed though put in the ground never grew into a tree. This idea of self-government never passed beyond the embryo state of the village Panchayat system and never spread into society at large. In the religious communities, among Sannyasins in the Buddhist monasteries, we have ample evidence to show that self-government was fully developed. Even now, one wonders to see how the power of the Panchayat system of the principles of self-government, is working amongst the Naga Sannyasins – what deep respect the 'Government by the Five' commands from them, what effective individual rights each Naga can exercise within his own sect, what excellent working of the power of organization and concerted action they have among themselves!

they had earned back to society. Thus they would prepare themselves for a life of Sannyasa or religious recluse, making way for their kids to get married, earn money, etc.

But there was one vital detail missing in Vajashravas' case. The Yajna required that one had to give away 'all' that one had earned. Vajashravas was keeping back the good things he had earned so that his sons could enjoy them. He was giving away only the useless things. Thus, he was retaining all the able-bodied cows, horses and livestock and giving away barren, worthless livestock that had been reduced to skin and bones.

Seeing this, the Upanishad notes, Shraddha entered into Vajashravas' son Nachiketa. Being a Hindu boy, he could not point out his father's or any elder's mistakes directly and openly. Hence he asked his father, "To whom will you give me away?"

We wish to point out two things here. In Shankara's Bhashya on this Upanishad, we do not find these details about Vajashravas' Yajna, nor the subtle detail that Nachiketa is pointing out his father's glaring mistake, indirectly. That is because, during Shankara's times, Indian society still had these ideas embedded firmly in its members. Not so today; we will find hardly Indian who will understand these two subtle points. Hence we find Swamiji pointing out them. In similar manner, innumerable instances can be seen in our study of any Upanishad where we will find Swamiji's explanations much more attuned to the modern Indian than that of any other Acharya of the past.

### **Shraddha:**

The next important point for us to note is this term Shraddha<sup>16</sup>. This term is vital in understanding Katha Upanishad according to Swamiji. In fact, he goes on to say that in this one mantra, that shraddha entered into Nachiketa, lies the entire message of this Upanishad. He says, "I remember that grand word of the Katha Upanishad – Shraddha or marvelous faith. An instance of Shraddha can be found in the life of Nachiketa. To preach the doctrine of Shraddha or genuine faith is the mission of my life." We must try to clearly understand this word before we proceed with our study of this Upanishad. Acharya Shankara's help is indispensable in our effort. He explains this word variously in the innumerable places that it appears in the Upanishads and Gita. We can classify these various meanings into three main ideas: Faith in a living power animating this world; Faith in the words of the Scriptures and Guru; an affirmative state of mind.

- **Faith in a living power animating this world:** We find instances of this aspect of Shraddha in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. See for instance the following entry: "*At Kamarpuṅgur I used to talk to Shibu, who was then a lad, four or five year old. When the clouds rumbled and lightning flashed, Shibu would say to me: 'There, uncle! They are striking matches again!' (All laugh.) One day I noticed him chasing grasshoppers by himself. The leaves rustled in the near-by trees. 'Hush! Hush!' he said to the leaves. 'I want to catch the grasshoppers.' He was a child and saw everything throbbing with consciousness. One cannot realize God without the faith that knows no guile, the simple faith of a child.*"<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Please refer to <https://wp.me/s8xvki-shraddha> for a detailed study of this most important term 'Shraddha'.

<sup>17</sup> Monday, September 29, 1884 It



Or again, the following entry: <sup>18</sup>

*MASTER (to the devotees): "The Paramahansa is like a five-year-old child. He sees everything filled with Consciousness. At one time I was staying at Kamarpukur when Shivaram was four or five years old. One day he was trying to catch grasshoppers near the pond. The leaves were moving. To stop their rustling he said to the leaves: 'Hush! Hush! I want to catch a grasshopper.' Another day it was stormy. It rained hard. Shivaram was with me inside the house. There were flashes of lightning. He wanted to open the door and go out. I scolded him and stopped him, but still he peeped out now and then. When he saw the lightning, he exclaimed, 'There, uncle! They are striking matches again!'*

- **Faith in the words of the Scriptures and Guru:** Let us see another very interesting instance in the Gospel. <sup>19</sup>

*A Devotee: "Then what is the way for a householder?"*

*Master: "Faith in the guru's words. You should depend on his instruction. Do your duties in the world, holding fast to his words, like a person whirling round and holding fast to a pillar. "One must not look on one's guru as a mere human being: it is Satchidananda Himself who appears as the guru. When the disciple has the vision of the Ishta, through the guru's grace, he finds the guru merging in Him. "What can one not achieve through simple faith! Once there was an annaprasana ceremony in a guru's house. His disciples volunteered, according to their powers, to supply the different articles of food. He had one disciple, a very poor widow, who owned a cow. She milked it and brought the guru a jar of milk. He had thought she would take charge of all the milk and curd for the festival. Angry at her poor offering, he threw the milk away and said to her, 'Go and drown yourself.' The widow accepted this as his command and went to the river to drown herself. But God was pleased with her guileless faith and, appearing before her, said: 'Take this pot of curd. You will never be able to empty it. The more curd you pour out, the more will come from the pot. This will satisfy your teacher.' The guru was speechless with amazement when the pot was given to him. After hearing from the widow the story of the pot, he went to the river, saying to her, 'I shall drown myself if you cannot show God to me.' God appeared then and there, but the guru could not see Him. Addressing God, the widow said, 'If my teacher gives up his body because Thou dost not reveal Thyself to him, then I too shall die.' So God appeared to the guru — but only once. "Now you see, because of faith in her guru the disciple herself had the vision of God and also showed Him to her teacher.*

This is very interesting because this illustration is uncannily similar to the Nachiketa story. Here too, Guru tells the disciple to go and die, essentially cursing her to 'go to hell', in modern language. And since the disciple was ready to go to hell even for remaining true to the words of the Guru, she got the vision of God. This is Shraddha.

- **An Affirmative state of mind:**

Swamiji considered this aspect of Shraddha as a panacea for all ills that had ravaged the Nation. Take for instance the following words of Swamiji: "*The ideal of faith in ourselves is of the greatest help to us. If faith in ourselves had been more extensively taught and practiced, I am sure a very large portion of the evils and miseries that we have would have vanished. Throughout the history of mankind, if any motive power has been more potent than another in the lives of all great men and women,*

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<sup>18</sup> Advice to Pundit Shashadhar Monday, June 30, 1884

<sup>19</sup> Saturday, December 10, 1881

*it is that of faith in themselves. Born with the consciousness that they were to be great, they became great. Let a man go down as low as possible; there must come a time when out of sheer desperation he will take an upward curve and will learn to have faith in himself. But it is better for us that we should know it from the very first. Why should we have all these bitter experiences in order to gain faith in ourselves? We can see that all the difference between man and man is owing to the existence or non-existence of faith in himself. Faith in ourselves will do everything. I have experienced it in my own life, and am still doing so; and as I grow older, that faith is becoming stronger and stronger. He is an atheist who does not believe in himself. The old religions said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is the atheist who does not believe in himself. But it is not selfish faith because the Vedanta, again, is the doctrine of oneness. It means faith in all, because you are all. Love for yourselves means love for all, love for animals, love for everything, for you are all one. It is the great faith which will make the world better. I am sure of that. He is the highest man who can say with truth, "I know all about myself." Do you know how much energy, how many powers, how many forces are still lurking behind that frame of yours? What scientist has known all that is in man? Millions of years have passed since man first came here, and yet but one infinitesimal part of his powers has been manifested. Therefore, you must not say that you are weak. How do you know what possibilities lie behind that degradation on the surface? You know but little of that which is within you. For behind you is the ocean of infinite power and blessedness."*<sup>20</sup>

We must note the appropriateness of the place where the Upanishad points out that Shraddha enters into Nachiketa. It was when he saw his father giving away old, useless cows as gifts to Brahmins. Why this particular situation? Nachiketa must have been a sincere and conscientious student. He must have studied the Taittiriya Upanishad from his teachers in the Gurukula. In fact, his formal education must have been over, and he must have come back home to start the next stage of life, and that was the reason his father was retiring from public life by performing the Vishwajit fire sacrifice, as we saw before. Now, in the convocation address in his Gurukula, Nachiketa had heard the mantras from the 'Acharya Upadesha' section of the Taittiriya Upanishad, 'Shraddhaya deyam, ashraaddhaya adeyam', which means, 'When you make a donation, give it with Shraddha; if you can't give with Shraddha, don't make a donation'. Here, Nachiketa found his own father making donations without Shraddha! That is when the words of his teachers, from the Upanishads, came back like thunder to Nachiketa, and the Katha Upanishad records it as 'Shraddha entered into him'.

It is natural that when we find our youngsters being precocious, we say in disgust, 'Go to hell!' When Nachiketa asked his father again and again as to whom he was donating his son, the father had said in disgust, "To Yama, the Lord of Death, I give you", he was in effect saying 'Go to Hell!' Nachiketa again took his father's words very seriously, for that is what happens when Shraddha awakens in a person. Words gain value. Words are not uttered in vain. He really made preparations to meet Death consciously. And he did meet the Lord of Death.

Now, we face a little problem with this portion of the Upanishad. It is one of the striking features of all Upanishads that they do not record anything that is illogical or irrational. But this Upanishad says that Nachiketa went to the abode of Death, and there he met the Lord of Death and had extended discussions with him. How do we understand this? Acharya Shankara comes to our rescue. He says that this description of the events in Nachiketa's life clearly shows that this portion of the Upanishad is

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<sup>20</sup> Complete Works: Vol-2: Practical Vedanta: Pt-I

**allegorical**, and not real.<sup>21</sup> People die. Nachiketa too could have died, just as everyone dies. However, where a soul goes after death is mere conjecture. Nothing is sure about it. The value of the allegory lies here – by meditating on Death, by approaching death consciously and willingly, Nachiketa obtained the answer to the final mystery of life. In other words, Nachiketa unraveled the mystery of death all by himself, and he attributed it to a mythic figure, Yama. But then, was Yama really just a mythic figure? Could it be that our lack of Shraddha makes us believe so? Could it be that our lack of sympathy with the worldview of our ancients leads us to consider Yama as just a fictional person? But the point to note here is this – the actual status of Yama is immaterial to the subject matter of this Upanishad. It is enough for us to stick to the rational view that Nachiketa, scolded by his father, stopped eating and drinking, and within three days was at the doors of death. He did not die; but he was almost dying. In that **cathartic experience**,<sup>22</sup> he summoned up his inner energies and resolved a great dilemma, the question of death. This is a sufficiently rational point of view.

We note the seriousness with which the ministers of Yama advise him about the correct treatment that ought to be given to a guest. These mantras are included in the Upanishad to highlight that the other portions<sup>23</sup> of the *Acharya Upadesha* of the Taittiriya Upanishad are taken seriously even in the heavens among the gods.

To compensate for any perceived insult or slight to the guest, Yama then offers Nachiketa three boons. These boons are simply amazing. It is very clear that Nachiketa put in a lot of thought before asking them. This young boy seems to have had an early childhood! As the 1<sup>st</sup> boon, Nachiketa asks that when he returns home, his father should receive him cordially and not be angry with him! As the 2<sup>nd</sup> boon, Nachiketa asks Yama to teach him the technique by which man achieves the highest in *this* world! In today's context, these two boons would have rendered Nachiketa as a hypocrite. Why? It is commonly understood today, especially in India, that people who are interested in spiritual matters ought not to be interested in the things of this world. This however is not a recent phenomenon. In all probabilities, this tendency is a spillover from the Buddhist era. If this world is the cause of misery, better to let go of this world. The formidable Advaita Vedanta philosophy developed so meticulously did not alleviate this situation, rather intensified it all the more. If this world is not Real, if it is *mithya* i.e. only apparently Real, but not really Real, and if Brahman alone is Real, then the obvious response to this world is one of neglect!

It is important to note that Acharya Shankara, in his commentary on these two boons, just glosses over them, clearly expressing his view that they are unimportant.<sup>24</sup> But the hold of tradition is so strong in this land that even though many commentators have felt that these two boons are worthless, nobody really expunged them from the Upanishad; for, no one has the right to change a single word of the Upanishad.

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<sup>21</sup> The main text of the Upanishad itself categorizes this text as an '*Akhyayika*', which loosely translates as a tale.

<sup>22</sup> We can't fail to notice the fact that in all cases where man has discovered the Truth **afresh** – the cases we call as Avatars – this cathartic experience is a common feature. We see it recorded in Buddha, Jesus and Sri Ramakrishna's lives too. In fact, when we consider the Ramakrishna Movement, the reason we accord the highest place of worship to Sri Ramakrishna is precisely this – he had to knock on the door of death in order to perceive the Spirit. Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda and the other disciples were assisted by Sri Ramakrishna in their effort at perceiving the Truth. He had none to assist him. He had to do it on his own. Now, if anyone tries to imitate his actions at arriving at the Truth, in other words, if anyone attempts to cut his own neck if God does not reveal Himself to him, what are the odds that the person will perceive the Truth, will see God?

<sup>23</sup> *Atithi devo bhava; tesham tvaya aasanena prashvasitavyam*

<sup>24</sup> In his Introduction to Katha Upanishad Bhashya, Acharya Shankara says, 'Performers of the Nachiketa Yajna attain immortality'. But when he gives the commentary on the actual mantra concerning the 2<sup>nd</sup> boon (I.i.13), he adds that the immortality gained by means of this Yajna is but relative immortality!

Anyone may proffer his or her own explanation for what is recorded in the Upanishads, but no one can touch one word. Notice that the disciples of Nachiketa too did not object to recording these two boons during their time. If they had felt that retaining these two boons would have reduced the stature of their Master, certainly they would themselves have glossed over them, perhaps recording a single statement such as ‘Nachiketa asked for two things which Yama gave’, and there it would have ended. Luckily, therefore, we have got these two boons in the Upanishad, intact, until the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. What do these two spiritual leaders have to say on this ‘unimportant’ portion of the Katha Upanishad?

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Boon:**

We shall consider the 2<sup>nd</sup> boon first. Nachiketa specifically asks Yama to teach him that Yajna by which he will attain the Brahma-Loka, a place where one has no old age or death, no hunger or thirst, and all live in bliss. From Brahma-Loka, when the creation comes to an end, the inhabitants of that Loka attain merger with Brahman. Is there or was there such a post-mortem world? We can’t say for sure; may be yes; most probably no. Human logic militates against such a proposition mainly because it is far-fetched. Since it is post-mortem, it could very well have been an elaborate scam dealt to the people of this land, by the Brahmin priests. But, the issue is not that it could be false. The issue is that man is inherently programmed to seek for such goals. The urge for achievement is inherent in man. Every man has a fundamental need to achieve. Achieve what? That depends; and it varies from man to man. But, the necessity for every man to achieve something or the other is fundamental.

Recent studies like the Maslow’s studies on human needs have thrown better light on this aspect of human nature. The various needs that man has, or can have, can be classified in different ways. The Ancient Rishis of India classified them under two different categories: *Abhyudaya* & *Nihshreyasa*, or *Pravritti* & *Nivritti*, or *Preyas* & *Shreyas*. Man can have two kinds of needs; one set of needs deals with this world; the other set of needs deals with his inner core, which is spiritual. So, we may roughly call these two sets of needs as worldly needs and spiritual needs. What differentiates these two types of needs? Any need, which when fulfilled, does not bring everlasting satisfaction in man, is a worldly need. Any need, when fulfilled, brings everlasting satisfaction in man, is a spiritual need. *Abhyudaya*, *Pravritti* and *Preyas* refer to a wide variety of needs that are acutely felt in human beings, and when satisfied, generate varied amounts of joy in the person, but always leaves him hungering for something more. *Nihshreyasa*, *Nivritti* and *Shreyas* refer to a very small set of needs in human beings; they too are very acutely felt by human beings; but they don’t arise until almost all of the other set of needs are more or less attempted. Note that we say ‘attempted’ and not ‘fulfilled’; the catch lies right there; it is impossible to totally fulfill the former set of needs; we may however seriously attempt to satisfy them; we do succeed in that attempt to some extent; but no matter how hard we try, something frustrates us ultimately. After a long time of this effort of trying to fulfil the *Abhyudaya*, *Pravritti*, *Preyas* set of needs, man finally comes to the conclusion, ‘lasting joy can never be had through these means at all’. Once this conclusion is settled in a person, he or she then starts looking in the opposite direction, that is, inside oneself; that reveals the other small set of needs – the *Nihshreyasa*, *Nivritti*, *Shreyas* set of needs. This shift in the person – from seeking the worldly needs to seeking spiritual needs – does not happen in a discrete moment. There is a lot of overlap. Even while seeking worldly needs, a person can have some hunger for spiritual goals. In fact, a huge number of people will have both these sets of needs working in them. Very few indeed will be there who have entirely one set of needs, to the utter exclusion of the other.

Now, due to certain historical developments in India, the masses ended up with the understanding that the only set of needs that are legitimate and therefore that ought to be fulfilled are the spiritual needs. The other set of needs, the worldly set, ought to be rejected outright! We feel that this development arose directly from Buddha's teachings. If desires are the root cause of all human misery, then the logical step would be to reject all desires. The only desire one ought to have is the desire to be desireless! Two thousand years of this line of thinking has greatly stunted the Indian man, and has all but destroyed the Indian society. But this kind of thinking was never the original line of thought espoused in the Upanishads. The Rishis of the Upanishads clearly understood that man will always have both these sets of needs in him, for a very long period in his life. They will exist side by side in the same person. Of course, one will not perceive the Truth unless he has the sole desire for the Spirit, but that does not mean that one can forcibly let go of the other set of needs, the worldly needs. In other words, worldly pursuits were given legitimacy in the Upanishads. There was never any confusion that the pursuit of worldly goals or fulfilment of the same, would ever lead a person to spiritual results. No. They never can. But, it is alright if one has worldly needs and wishes to pursue them. There are legal ways of pursuing them. And if one does it right, in the long run, one will come to realize that it is a dead end, or that one keeps moving in circles. Once that realization dawns, the person will step out of that deadly circle and start his pursuit of the Spirit in right earnest. Where, in the person, does this realization dawn? Is it in his thoughts? Or in his emotions? The entire personality should respond with this thought, that the pursuit of worldly goals is a dead end. An intellectual understanding is not of much value. This issue can never be a social law, or a generalization applicable to all men, everywhere. It is a matter of inner growth. Each person will have to wait for this realization deep within one's own consciousness, for the next door to open for him. The pursuit of worldly goals was never looked down upon in the Upanishads, like it has been in India for the last 2000 years, nor has it been pursued to the exclusion of the spiritual ideal like it has been in the West for the last 300 years!

The Upanishads however do present a concept known in today's terms as 'Excellence' when it comes to pursuing worldly goals. The pursuit of excellence awakens certain faculties in the person which eventually enable a person to pursue the spiritual ideal in life. Moral life is the foundation of excellence in worldly activities. Anyone can get rich, especially by harming and destroying others. Can one get rich by assisting others, and without harming others? That calls for a strong moral life. When we say that moral life is essential for spiritual life, what the ancient Rishis meant is this – a person will pursue worldly ideals, **bound** by strict moral codes. Doing this awakens certain faculties in that person, on which a rich spiritual life can be built. In fact, trying to lead a moral life, by excluding oneself from worldly activities is something that the Upanishads never even envisaged.

Take any moral ideal; Satya (truth) for instance. Human interaction is the platform on which this moral ideal finds its play. If a person lives like a recluse, with whom will he be truthful? Where is the opportunity for him to develop his truthfulness? Similarly Ahimsa (non-violence); can a person conduct himself in such a way that he doesn't hurt another person, in thought-word-deed? He has practiced non-violence. If a person doesn't interact with anyone, isolates himself from society, where is the other person who can be harmed? In such a situation, where is the opportunity for him to practice Ahimsa? Today, everywhere we find people talking about moral education, value education, etc. It makes no sense unless seen from this perspective of pursuit of excellence in daily life in society. Anybody can mug up and get marks in an examination; or anyone can cheat and get marks in an examination. Can we get a student who can study hard, understand things, remember things, recall things at the right time, and present things in

writing or by spoken word meaningfully, and then get high marks? There you have an honest student and such a student is the right raw material for spiritual aspirations. The 1<sup>st</sup> requirement for creating such students in large numbers is the lure of the worldly goal of excellence. Somehow, society must start valuing higher standards of worldly life. If not the entire society, at least parts of the society must do it. Here and there, we must have people who value higher standards of worldly life. We must have huge numbers of such people pursuing, with great effort, those higher standards of worldly life.

Man will work. The urge is universal. It is hardwired into the body and mind of man. He cannot wish this urge away. Man will work and achieve whatever he wants. What does man really want? As we saw before, man wants apparently innumerable things. But a closer look at man's life will reveal that there is indeed only a couple of things that he wants, but in various forms. Man wants **joy**. Man wants to **know**. Man wants to **live**. All that man aspires for is these three only, in various combinations, forms and intensities. Man has devised methods and techniques by means of which he can attain all these three things. The trouble lies in only one issue. Man wants *unending* joy. Man wants to know *everything*. And man wants to live *forever*. Till date, man has not devised any work process, any method, any technique, by means of which he will get all these, or even one of these. We can get various kinds of joys in this world. But there is no known technique by which man can get unending joy. All the happiness that man experiences stops after sometime. It would have been great if they just stopped being pleasant. Many cases, what gave us joy once upon a time, now gives us pain. We can know many, many things. But who can claim that he knows everything? About the tiniest little thing, man is incapable of knowing everything. Just when he starts to get the feeling that he has known everything about some subject, some person, some situation, some phenomenon or something, from out of the blue will come one more fact that puts all his knowledge to naught! Knowledge is power. When man faces ignorance about a subject he thought he knew everything, he feels utterly powerless, impotent.

Even though this is the fundamental nature of this world we live in, man will still dream of attaining the highest in this world. Our ancient Rishis had come up with such a conception; the highest state of existence that man can ever imagine, and a special work procedure by means of which he can achieve that. This highest state of existence was called 'Brahma-Loka' or 'Swarga'. Once a man reaches that 'Loka' or 'world', he will live forever, without old age, disease or death, without hunger and thirst, without any misery. In other words, this is the highest conception of worldly existence that a man can ever come up with, and that was accessible to anyone who would follow a very special procedure. It is about this special procedure that Nachiketa is asking Yama to teach him; the unique fire-sacrifice that will confer upon the performer, an entry into this Brahma-Loka.

Philosophically, this conception of Brahma-Loka is riven with loopholes. But, the desire to attain to this highest state of worldly existence indicates a very important quality in the person who aspires for it. The person has a very high moral standard, and he is an extremely hard worker. We hazard a very ambitious speculation at this point, regarding the qualifications of a spiritual aspirant. As it stands now, the standard qualifications for a spiritual aspirant are the 'Six treasures' according to Vedanta tradition or the 'Yama & Niyama' according to the Sankhya-Yoga tradition. In all probabilities, this set of qualifications must have been a post-Buddhistic development. Originally, in the Upanishads, the qualifications for spiritual life must have included 'worldly achievements'. People strive for spiritual development without having striven for, and achieved to some extent, success in this world. In fact, the way the qualification set is designed, it seems as though having worldly achievements is a major

disqualification today for spiritual aspirations! Worldly achievements, accompanied by intense introspection, alone can convince the mind that something higher than the highest that this world can offer, has to be sought after. Thus material development ought to be a sine-qua-non for any spiritual aspirations, for it was so during the Upanishadic period. Moreover, such an arrangement makes immense sense psychologically, at the individual level, and sociologically, at the collective level. This 2<sup>nd</sup> boon is important against this background. It is quite plausible that Yama was highly pleased with Nachiketa for having desired this boon, since it clearly showed that Nachiketa meant business; as a person, this young boy was highly mature; and, most importantly, having attained the highest state that this world can offer, if Nachiketa can renounce that, he will qualify himself for spiritual attainment, at the top of the merit list, so to speak.

When we study the works of Swami Vivekananda, we find him spending an inordinate amount of time on material development of our country. On the face of it, this looks odd. A spiritual teacher, espousing worldly development? How do you reconcile that? Many hold that opinion that Swamiji had a very sensitive heart, and he was unable to see the material suffering of his dear countrymen. If that were so, why not give them directly the highest teaching of the Atman, lift them up beyond the pale of this world and its suffering, like Buddha had attempted to do, and solve forever man's material suffering? Swamiji did not attempt that because Buddha had already done that and had failed. Moreover, Swamiji had a very sensitive heart and an *equally* intense intellect. While his heart bled for his suffering countrymen, his brain told him clearly that unless they worked hard and solved their present problems of daily existence, no amount of spiritual teaching would bear fruit. Unless man solves bravely his daily problems, he ought not to attempt solving the eternal problems. That would be a farce, and a travesty of the spiritual ideal. Poverty is solely due to laziness. But then, isn't poverty caused by social injustice? That is so only apparently. If man can apply his brains, he will overcome all social problems and raise himself up to prosperity. This quality is called industriousness. That industriousness is what Swamiji wanted in all Indians, and that industriousness is what is represented in this 2<sup>nd</sup> boon of Nachiketa.

### **The 1<sup>st</sup> boon:**

We can now take up the 1<sup>st</sup> boon in some detail. Nachiketa asks Yama that when he goes back home, to ensure that his father receive him cordially, and not be angry with him, for his seeming impertinence. This is really interesting for more than one reason. Nachiketa wants to return to the world! Indeed, the impertinence of this young fellow seems to have no limits! No one ever returns from the House of Death. Of course, everyone returns from the Abode of Yama, but with a new body and in a new home. Nachiketa wants to return to his previous home and live again with his previous parents. Certainly, this would have surprised Yama. Yet, we do not find him objecting to this boon. Yama can be a tricky customer, as shall see during the 3<sup>rd</sup> boon. If he doesn't want to grant the boon, he will try beating around the bush in various ways. In this case, we find Yama readily accepting Nachiketa's request. He says, "*Yes. When you return home, your father will be delighted to see you alive again. He will receive you with kind words and will sleep well at night.*"

We can think of some reasons why Yama behaves this way. One: Nachiketa was not expected in the Abode of Death. He had forcibly entered it. Hence he had to return. This is one plausible answer. Two: This entire episode of Nachiketa and Yama is but an allegory. No one takes allegories seriously.

Logic does not apply to stories, which have purely anecdotal value. There is a 3<sup>rd</sup> reason, which we think is the real reason why Yama readily granted the 1<sup>st</sup> boon. We will elaborate it presently.

The final resolution of the life & death conundrum is obtained only in a spiritual state called Nirvikalpa Samadhi. A person can attain to this state by two paths – the ‘*neti, neti*’ path and the ‘*iti, iti*’ path. Both of them attain the same state of consciousness. However, the path adopted to attain to that state determines what happens to the person *after* attaining the Nirvikalpa Samadhi. The person who follows the ‘*neti, neti*’ path remains in the blessed state for about three weeks, and thereafter the body collapses without life. The blessed soul dies after remaining for 21 days in that highest state of unitary consciousness. On the other hand, the person who follows the ‘*iti, iti*’ path, attains to Nirvikalpa Samadhi, stays there for a little while, and then returns to perceive multiplicity. It is a completely changed perception of multiplicity that he will now have, but the more important point is that he *returns!* We may recall that famous story which Sri Ramakrishna would tell many times in the Gospel:

*“Once four friends, in the course of a walk, saw a place enclosed by a wall. The wall was very high. They all became eager to know what was inside. One of them climbed to the top of the wall. What he saw on looking inside made him speechless with wonder. He only cried, ‘Ah! Ah!’ and dropped in. He could not give any information about what he saw. The others, too, climbed the wall, uttered the same cry, ‘Ah! Ah!’, and jumped in. Now who could tell what was inside? Sages like Jadabharata and Dattatreya, after realizing Brahman, could not describe It. A man’s ‘I’ completely disappears when he goes into Samadhi after attaining the Knowledge of Brahman. That is why Ramprasad sang, addressing his mind: ‘If you should find the task too hard, Call upon Ramprasad for help.’ The mind must completely merge itself in Knowledge. But that is not enough. ‘Ramprasad’, that is, the principle of ‘I’, must vanish too. Then alone does one get the Knowledge of Brahman.”*

*A Devotee: “Sir, is it possible then that Sukadeva did not have the ultimate Knowledge?”*

*Master: “According to some people, Sukadeva only saw and touched the Ocean of Brahman; he did not dive into It. That is why he could return to the world and impart religious instruction. According to others, he returned to the world of name and form, after attaining the Knowledge of Brahman, for the purpose of teaching others. He had to recite the Bhagavatham to King Parikshit and had to teach people in various ways; therefore God did not destroy his ‘I’ altogether. God kept in him the ‘ego of Knowledge.’*

*“It is said that sages like Dattatreya and Jadabharata did not return to the relative plane after having the vision of Brahman. According to some people, Sukadeva tasted only a drop of that Ocean of Brahman -Consciousness. He saw and heard the rumbling of the waves of that Ocean, but he did not dive into it. A Brahmachari once said to me, ‘One who goes beyond Kedar cannot keep his body alive.’ Likewise, a man cannot preserve his body after attaining Brahmajnana. The body drops off in twenty-one days. There was an infinite field beyond a high wall. Four friends tried to find out what was beyond the wall. Three of them, one after the other, climbed the wall, saw the field, burst into loud laughter, and dropped to the other side. These three could not give any information about the field. Only the fourth man came back and told people about it. He is like those who retain their bodies, even after attaining Brahmajnana, in order to teach others. Divine Incarnations belong to this class.”*

*“Take the case of a man who stands by a wall on both sides of which there are meadows stretching to infinity. If there is a hole in the wall, through it he can see everything on the other side. If the hole is a big one, he can even pass through it. The ego of the Incarnations and other Isvaraḳotis is like the wall with a hole. Though they remain on this side of the wall, still they can see the endless meadow on the other side. That is to say, though they have a human body, they are always united with God. Again, if they will, they can pass through the big hole to the other side and remain in*



*Samadhi. And if the hole is big enough, they can go through it and come back again. That is to say, though established in Samadhi, they can again descend to the worldly plane.” The devotees listened breathlessly to these words about the mystery of Divine Incarnation. #*

*M: “You explained clearly, the other day, how God incarnates Himself on earth.”*

*Master: “Tell me what I said.”*

*M: “You told us to imagine a field extending to the horizon and beyond. It extends without any obstruction; but we cannot see it on account of a wall in front of us. In that wall there is a round hole. Through the hole we see a part of that infinite field.”*

*Master: “Tell me what that hole is.”*

*M: “You are that hole. Through you can be seen everything— that Infinite Meadow without any end.”*

*Sri Ramakrishna was very much pleased. Patting M.’s back, he said: “I see you have understood that. That’s fine!”*

*M: “It is indeed difficult to understand that. One cannot quite grasp how God, Perfect Brahman that He is, can dwell in that small body. Further, you tell us that you and the Mother are one. Likewise, Christ said, ‘I and My Father are one.’”*

*Master (smiling): “Anything else?”*

*M: “You say to us, ‘God will surely listen to you if you call on Him earnestly.’ So also Christ said, ‘Knock and it shall be opened unto you.’”*

*Master: “Well, if God has incarnated Himself again, is it a fractional or a partial or a complete manifestation of God? Some say it is a complete manifestation.”*

*M: “Sir, I don’t quite understand the meaning of complete or partial or fractional Incarnation. But I have understood, as you explained it, the idea of a round hole in a wall.”*

*Master: “Tell me about it.”*

*M: “There is a round hole in the wall. Through it one is able to see part of the meadow on the other side of the wall. Likewise, through you one sees part of the Infinite God.”*

*Master: “True. You can see five or six miles of the meadow at a stretch.”*

We see the following points very clearly in the passages quoted above. **One:** When a person attains Nirvikalpa Samadhi, he doesn’t generally come back. Very rare cases exist where the person does return from that state and teaches people what lies in that state, and how one can attain that state. That happens only in the case of Avatars and Isvarakotis. This Isvarakoti is a special category of persons that Sri Ramakrishna was fond of referring to in his explanations of Samadhi and post-Samadhi experiences. Since they return from the state of Nirvikalpa Samadhi, for the express reason of educating the people about spirituality, we can understand them to be the same category as the Acharya that we encountered before in this article. **Two:** How does this category of people return from the point of no-return? Sri

Ramakrishna says that it is by the *Will of God*. God *wishes* that this category of people should experience the Nirvikalpa Samadhi, and then return back with the same identity in the same psycho-physical mechanism, and educate the rest of mankind. The explanation is simple. The problem however lies elsewhere. What happens if the person who reaches Nirvikalpa Samadhi by the path of '*neti, neti*', by rejecting all thoughts, even that of God or the power of God? In that case, if God wills that he should return, what happens to that person? He is unable to digest the return experience. He will consider the return experience as a fall from the highest state he had achieved, and will keep on attempting to regain that state. Why will he do that? Because he has no construct left with him to help him integrate his post-Nirvikalpa Samadhi experience of the return to multiplicity. Will he not educate the rest of mankind? He may, or he may not. If he does, it will be deeply colored with his disgust for all interpersonal relations. The whole problem lies in the rejection of Shakti in the path of '*neti, neti*'. In their ardor to reject and renounce everything, they do away with the power of Brahman too.

There is a path that accepts the power of Brahman, Shakti. That is the '*iti, iti*' path. In this path, the aspirant does not reject indiscriminately. He only rejects the lower for the higher. Regarding every aspect of his own personality, there will be a lower form and a higher form. He will steadily reject the lower in exchange for the higher. Regarding every aspect of this world, there will be a lower form and a higher form. He will steadily reject the lower in exchange for the higher. Similarly, regarding every aspect of God, there will be a lower form and a higher form. He will steadily reject the lower in exchange for the higher. Thus renunciation is followed, for without renunciation, there is no spiritual achievement. But this renunciation is of a different kind, compared to the merciless, ruthless renunciation followed by the adherents of the '*neti, neti*' path. In this path, all along, the aspirant maintains a loving relationship with God. Such relationships hold no value in the other path. Every thought that arises in the mind, every experience brought in by the senses, every act performed by the body and mind is offered as loving oblation to God. This practice matures over time and God becomes real to the aspirant. He will 'see' God, at one point of time. God starts responding just as other beings have been responding with him till now. Then, as intimacy develops further, a point arises, where the aspirant himself pleads with God to reveal to him His impersonal form. Or, God Himself, out of His infinite grace, reveals His impersonal form to the devotee. And thus Nirvikalpa Samadhi ensues. This is how this '*iti, iti*' path progresses.

The vital point of difference between the two paths to Nirvikalpa Samadhi is Shakti. Adherents of '*neti, neti*' path reject Shakti. Adherents of the '*iti, iti*' path accept and depend on Shakti. If one attains Nirvikalpa Samadhi by rejecting Shakti, he will have no locus-standi to return to multiplicity. Even if he does, he will struggle to run back to Samadhi and not have any intercourse with this world. If one attains Nirvikalpa Samadhi by accepting Shakti, his return will be considered as a means of a richer interaction with this world. Everything in this world will appear as suffused with consciousness and life. While the former will also see everything as suffused with consciousness and life upon his return from Samadhi, he would be inherently trained to reject the life aspect in everything and perceive only the consciousness aspect, which will immediately throw him back into the Nirvikalpa Samadhi. The latter too will once in a while sublimate the life aspect of things in his perception and perceive only consciousness and slip into Nirvikalpa Samadhi, but he will be able to integrate his to and fro journey between unitary and multiplicity consciousness, between transcendence and immanence, between the impersonal and the personal, meaningfully.

It is in the background of this explanation that we have to see Sri Ramakrishna's joy when Naren accepted Kali, while in Dakshineswar. We don't see Sri Ramakrishna expressing the same amount of joy when Naren experienced Nirvikalpa Samadhi while in Cossipore Garden House.

There is then the question of why a person will ever return to this world after attaining Nirvikalpa Samadhi. The followers of the '*neti, neti*' path propose a theory of Prarabda karma. They say that man accumulates three kinds of karma – Agami, Sanchita, and Prarabda. Agami karma is what we create through our present actions. These will fructify later on. Sanchita karma is what we have already accumulated through our past actions. They are already in our store house, and are abiding their time to fructify. Prarabda karma is that karma which has already started fructifying, but hasn't yet run its full course. This is quite a neat theory proposed by the philosophers of the '*neti, neti*' path. This explanation however has two problems. One: It places karma beyond Pure Consciousness, thereby undermining the supremacy of Pure Consciousness which they themselves uphold. Two: It reeks of materialism in the final analysis; it explains the whole phenomenon of Nirvikalpa Samadhi from a mechanistic stand point. The moment we present this 2<sup>nd</sup> objection, they counter it by saying that Karma is not pure materialism, for the dispenser of Karma, the Vidhata or Ishwara is the 1<sup>st</sup> manifestation of Pure Consciousness. The pure Advaitins, therefore, acknowledge God, but deny God's power over themselves or their lives. The followers of the '*iti, iti*' path, who can be called the Vijnanis, or Vijnana Vedantins<sup>25</sup>, have a better argument in this matter. They say that Brahman and Brahma-Shakti are identical. Shakti has complete control over us, before Nirvikalpa Samadhi, during Nirvikalpa Samadhi, and after Nirvikalpa Samadhi. Whether and when a person will be able to go beyond all multiplicity and merge in complete unitary consciousness is a matter of the Divine Will. How long he will remain in that highest state of consciousness is also a matter of the Divine Will. When and for how long he will return to phenomenon is also a matter of Divine Will.

Now, we enter a rather subtle and extremely controversial phase of this issue. The followers of the '*iti, iti*' path keep on using the terms God, Shakti, and Divine Will. What exactly is this power of Brahman? Where is it lodged? How does it operate? If we take their argument to its logical conclusion, we shall see that the will of man, in its purest form, is the same as the Divine Will. Man in his purest form is God Himself. Therefore, the purest form of power that man possesses is what he has all along been calling Shakti. The key lies in purity. From this line of argument, it follows that if a man, using his will in its purest form, decides that he will return from Nirvikalpa Samadhi and experience multiplicity, in order to enjoy divinity in myriad forms, he will be able to do so. We request our readers to allow this last statement, we just made, to sink in.

Before a man enters into Nirvikalpa Samadhi, he *can* make a wish to return to this phenomenal world. Let us reiterate here that this wish has to proceed from the purest core of his being. Any other wish will simply obstruct the onset of the Samadhi itself. But, a personal wish arising out of the core of one's being is nothing but the Divine Will (allowing for the strange language used by the devotees) and here in the 1<sup>st</sup> boon, Nachiketa was using this boon for exactly that purpose – he will resolve the problem of life & death in Nirvikalpa Samadhi through Yama's grace, and then return to explain it to others known to him in the world.

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<sup>25</sup> This is a term coined by *Swami Medhananda* of RKMVERI, and it is catching up fast in the academic circles. By this term is meant the followers of Sri Ramakrishna-Swami Vivekananda.

We see the clearest example of this phenomenon in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. We recall how he experienced Samadhi during his worship of Mother Kali. One night, while worshipping Her, his frustration at not having seen Her reached a crescendo. In an amazing act of catharsis, he decided to kill himself, since he was unable to ‘see’ Her, just as Ramprasad and Kamalakanta had done in the past. Or to be more precise, he decided to kill himself, since ‘She’ hadn’t revealed Herself to him, just as She had revealed Herself to Ramprasad and Kamalakanta in the past. The psychology of the ‘*iti, iti*’ path is revealed very clearly when we present Sri Ramakrishna’s predicament in the 2<sup>nd</sup> format – ‘She hadn’t revealed Herself to him.’ Then, Sri Ramakrishna slipped into Samadhi. He remained in that state for an indeterminate period of time. Then he regained normal consciousness. That was when he beheld the beautiful form of Kali. The mind of Sri Ramakrishna was the purest a human being could ever have. And that extremely pure mind felt total and utter disgust with everything of this world. And in that state of utter disgust, the mind collapsed on itself during that defining moment of catharsis. And Sri Ramakrishna slipped into the highest state of Nirvikalpa Samadhi. The Samadhi he had this 1<sup>st</sup> time in his life was Nirvikalpa Samadhi.<sup>26</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna, somehow, believed that this return from Nirvikalpa Samadhi was due to the will of the Divine Mother. His cultural upbringing had programmed him to interpret his amazing spiritual experience, and his consequent present state of consciousness as a cat & mouse game between the Divine Mother and himself.<sup>27</sup> All his effort was now directed at repeating that amazing spiritual experience, which simply eluded him. Now, if it was indeed the Will of the Shakti of Brahman that the 19-year old Sri Ramakrishna should return to perception of multiplicity after experiencing the Nirvikalpa Samadhi, Sri Ramakrishna did not seem to really understand the entire ramification of this phenomenon. Therefore, gradually, what he had experienced in one consolidated experience had to be parsed, thread by thread, which is what we see him do in his life under different Gurus, such as Bhairavi Brahmani, the Ramayat Sadhu and Tota Puri. Under Tota Puri’s guidance, he once again attained that supernal state of consciousness which he had achieved long ago on that most eventful night when he attempted to cut his own throat. Tota Puri had, in effect, taught him how to attain that state of unitary consciousness, through a systematic, time-tested process, which incidentally, had completely rejected Shakti. Ever since he was able to replicate that spiritual experience, Sri Ramakrishna was known to be lost in that state for days on end. But, every time, he would invariably return to normal consciousness. And each time, he attributed his return to the Will of the Divine Mother. Now, if it was indeed the Will of the Divine Mother to return to normal consciousness after merging himself in Nirvikalpa Samadhi, (which is what Sri Ramakrishna believed it was), why did he not understand that the Divine Mother does not want him to remain merged forever in that unitary state of consciousness? We believe this was because he was not yet done integrating all his spiritual experiences. In other words, he was not yet able to properly digest all his spiritual experiences that he had achieved. What we mean by ‘integrating’ or ‘digesting’ spiritual experiences is this – when a person has spiritual experiences, he gets access to newer facts of existence. These facts refer to his own self, to the world, and to God. These facts need to be squared with one’s ideas of his own self, of the world, and of God. The ideas one has about these three things – oneself, world, and God – are together called Philosophy. One needs to make sense of one’s own experience with one’s philosophy. This making sense of one’s experiences with one’s philosophy is what we call ‘integrating’

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Vedanta Kesari*: Jan 1955: later published as a book ‘*Seeing Brahman with open eyes*’ from Vedanta Study Circle, Greece.

<sup>27</sup> In this context, it is interesting to speculate how Sri Ramakrishna’s life would have turned out, if he had come in contact with Tota Puri, before becoming a priest in the Dakshineswar Kali Temple!

or ‘digesting’ one’s spiritual experiences. After the training under Tota Puri, Sri Ramakrishna was able to raise his consciousness to Nirvikalpa state as and when he wanted. There must have been innumerable instances when both Guru and disciple had sat together in the Panchavati and had become merged in Nirvikalpa Samadhi. Although both were able to merge in Nirvikalpa Samadhi at will, they couldn’t stay there for long. They would invariably return to normal consciousness. Tota Puri and Sri Ramakrishna each had their own separate explanations for why this return would happen.

In fact, there must have been serious discussion between the both of them about this issue. While Tota Puri must have proffered his standard Advaita Vedanta explanation of the Prarabda Karma bringing them back, Sri Ramakrishna attributed the return to the will of the Divine Mother or Shakti. The point of contention would certainly have gravitated to the fact that while one could achieve Nirvikalpa Samadhi at will, why couldn’t one will to remain there interminably? This is the one argument that goes against the ‘will of Shakti’ explanation. Sri Ramakrishna must have naturally contended that even going into Nirvikalpa Samadhi was due to the will of the Divine Mother, although, it seemed apparently that one could do so with one’s own volition. This contention must have seemed a bit dogmatic to the sternly philosophical Tota Puri. But, when his own stomach gave way, and he decided to merge forever in Nirvikalpa Samadhi, in which state he was above the excruciating pain, he found that he was unable to attain to that state! A state which he had been able to achieve at will was now beyond his grasp! He must have then decided to drown his body in the Ganga, since living in that diseased body was serving no purpose, what with he having achieved the highest state of consciousness possible for man. He found he was unable to even kill himself; for the mighty Ganga did not have enough water to drown him that day! Here we find Tota Puri himself struggling to make sense of his own life’s experiences, ‘digesting’ his experiences. The only tenable explanation would be that everything concerning him, everything concerning this world, is due to the will of Shakti. For the most part, it seems as though our own will has freedom to act. But, this feeling of freedom also is due to the will of the Divine Mother. Furthermore, it is possible to suitably place one’s own will, after coming down from Nirvikalpa Samadhi, in such a position that it is identical with the will of the Divine Mother. For doing this, one needs to place one’s consciousness in the threshold between unity and multiplicity. Sri Ramakrishna discovered this place and called it ‘Bhavamukha’. Once he was able to place his own will in that state of union with the will of Shakti, he achieved the pinnacle of perfection of human existence. Being born as a man, this state of consciousness is what we need to aspire for. For, stationed here, man achieves fulfillment in every respect of the term.

After stabilizing himself in the state of Bhavamukha, Sri Ramakrishna trained himself on how to achieve Nirvikalpa Samadhi and how to descend from there, without either experience jarring his self-image. Except for this state of Bhavamukha, in every other case of spiritual experience, one enters into a tension between one’s own role and the role of God in one’s life. We note something very interesting in Sri Ramakrishna’s life. By the time his disciples gathered around him, we see something amazing in him. No longer is he a struggling soul trying to achieve Nirvikalpa Samadhi and helplessly coming down to multiplicity and then struggling to make sense of what was happening in his life. We have seen that period in his life before. But not now. Now, he has perfected the process of ‘going and coming’. Before entering into Nirvikalpa Samadhi, he has learned to make a wish, such as ‘I will smoke tobacco’, or ‘I will drink water’. Then he merges in Nirvikalpa Samadhi. Then he returns to normal consciousness. Why is it that now we do not see the Divine Mother instructing him to remain in normal consciousness? Previously, when he returned from Nirvikalpa Samadhi, he felt, or perhaps saw, or as he preferred to say,

he ‘heard’ the divine mother instructing him to remain a few notches below the highest state of unitary consciousness. Now, we don’t see him make such claims. Now he proudly demonstrates that he can ‘go and come back’, entirely based on a wish he himself makes! Sri Ramakrishna basically re-discovered an ancient technique of handling consciousness, which was known to Nachiketa, as he demonstrated in asking for the 1<sup>st</sup> boon!

### **The 3<sup>rd</sup> boon:**

We have dwelt on the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> boon of Nachiketa in sufficient detail. We shall now study the 3<sup>rd</sup> boon that Nachiketa asked of Yama. Katha Upanishad, proper, starts with this 3<sup>rd</sup> boon. This book has 6 chapters. In the upper middle portion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, Yama starts answering Nachiketa seriously regarding the question raised in the 3<sup>rd</sup> boon. Out of a total of about 109 mantras, 76 mantras are allotted to Yama’s answer to the 3<sup>rd</sup> boon. That amounts to roughly 70% of the Upanishad. This shows the importance given to the final question and its answer. Moreover, we have seen that the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> boon make sense only against the 3<sup>rd</sup> boon. That portion has already been dealt with in sufficient detail. We shall now look a bit deeper into the 3<sup>rd</sup> boon.

We find Nachiketa asking the 3<sup>rd</sup> boon **four times** in the Upanishad. We have seen him ask the 1<sup>st</sup> & the 2<sup>nd</sup> boon. He merely asked them and Yama was more than happy to grant them. In fact, for the 2<sup>nd</sup> boon, Nachiketa specifically asks Yama to teach him that Yajna by which he will attain the Brahma-Loka, a place where one has no old age or death, no hunger or thirst, and all live in bliss.<sup>28</sup> As soon as he asked this boon, Yama granted the knowledge of the Yajna to him, and added two more gifts; he proclaimed that henceforth, that Yajna would be called ‘Naachiketa Agni’<sup>29</sup>, and also gifted him a beautiful necklace, made of many precious stones. It is natural to assume that the 3<sup>rd</sup> boon too would have met with the same fate. Nachiketa asks it, and Yama grants it. But that did not happen. Yama started beating around the bush.

Nachiketa says, “*There is this doubt about a man when he is dead. Some say that he exists; others say that he does not. You must teach me the truth about this matter. This is my 3<sup>rd</sup> boon.*” This is the **1<sup>st</sup> time** Nachiketa asks this boon. In reply, Yama says, “*Even the gods used to have their doubts about this matter, since the nature of the Atman is extremely subtle. No. I can’t explain it to you. Please release me from this boon, and ask me something else instead.*” The reply is fair enough. Yama expressed himself very diplomatically. He said that even the higher beings, the gods, used to have doubts about the Atman. Essentially, he was saying, ‘My boy, you can’t understand it, even if I explain it. I have tried many times explaining it to others – other human beings like you, and even the higher beings. They didn’t understand it. I am afraid you too might not. It would be a wasted effort. Drop the idea.’ But, we already saw that Nachiketa had shraddha awakened within him. When shraddha awakens within a person, he develops an affirmative state of mind. So, Nachiketa felt deep within himself that if only Yama would explain the secret of the Atman to him, he would certainly grasp it. That faith he had in himself and in his own abilities.

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<sup>28</sup> **I.i.12-13:** 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 boon.*

<sup>29</sup> Just as in the present age, in those olden days too, this must have been a matter of great prestige. Today, if any law or principle or theory is named after someone, it is a big deal. Even so, having a very important Yajna named after oneself must have been a big deal in those days too.

So, Nachiketa doesn't give up. He presses Yama a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, quite patiently. He says, *“Well, Lord of Death, as you so rightly put it, even the gods have doubts about the Atman. Even the gods don't know whether something survives the death of a person or not. You have also said very rightly that this is a subject very difficult to understand. That is exactly why I choose only this boon, for where will I get another person as qualified as you to explain it to me!”* Nachiketa is a very precocious boy! He argues like a pro with the Lord of Death! He turns Yama's argument on its head. Yama's subtle hint that Nachiketa might not understand it is not lost on the boy. Nachiketa seems to be saying, 'Fine, you may believe that I may not understand the answer you give. But, then what sort of a teacher are you? Aren't you the best qualified to clear this doubt of mine? Aren't you the Lord of Death? Don't you deal with the death of every living being, be it an ordinary person or a realized soul?'<sup>30</sup> You know the answer. Well, then, explain it to me. If you are a really good teacher, I will certainly grasp what you say!

There was a solid reason why Yama refused to answer this question. Now, Yama tells Nachiketa, *“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 (i.e. in my kingdom, the Kingdom of Death) as many years as you desire. If you deem any other boon equal to that, choose it; choose wealth and a long life. Be the king 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.”* Why is Yama repeatedly offering 'things' to Nachiketa? Nachiketa has been very specific in what he wanted. He wanted to know the truth about the Atman. And what is Yama giving him? Things, and more things! Why? The most important qualification required in a person to know the secret of the Atman is '**Desirelessness**'. Nachiketa had already asked to know the Yajna by which one could obtain Brahma-Loka. If he wants to 'enjoy' and 'experience' this life or the life hereafter, he is not qualified to learn about the Atman. The desire to 'enjoy' and 'experience' life is called Bhoga in Sanskrit. The thirst for Bhoga must have been quenched in a person before he embarks on the quest for the Atman. In other words, he must have fulfilled the Maslow's five types of needs. Then only will he be qualified for Self-transcendence. It is believed that when the mind is full of desires, even intellectually you can't understand the idea of the Atman, let alone experience the Atman. Even an intellectual understanding of the Atman calls for ridding the mind to a great extent of desires. Yama had to make sure of this qualification in Nachiketa.

Nachiketa's reply to Yama, this time, made history. The words he chose to answer Yama's tantalizing offer have formed the gold standard for renunciation in India. He said, *“But, these things that you offer, endure only till tomorrow (i.e. for two days max). Furthermore, they exhaust the vigor 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 boon 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.”*

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<sup>30</sup> We have already dealt with this point on page #12, that Nachiketa is asking about the death of a realized soul, and not about any ordinary person. For, there was a consensus among all learned people that ordinary people, after death, would be born again, depending on their karma. Nachiketa had even proffered this argument to his own father.

We see something similar happen in Swami Vivekananda's life. His father passes away quite young. Naren and his siblings are not yet settled in life. He suddenly becomes the eldest male in the family, and he is but a 19 year-old lad. Uncertainty looms large over the family. Sri Ramakrishna tells him that if he can approach Mother Kali in the Temple and ask Her to help him, She will gladly do so. Whatever he wishes for, he can ask Her. She will grant it all. Naren goes into the Temple, but is incapable of asking Her anything except this very thing that Nachiketa had asked for thousands of years ago – the secret of the Atman.

Some points in Nachiketa's answer deserve our attention. When a person reaches the end of his desires, when he has no more desires to be fulfilled, he acquires a certain abrasiveness in his behavior. Just look at Nachiketa's choice of words: "Keep your horses, dances and songs for yourself." That is a very rough way of speaking, isn't it? Something has been offered to you. You may decline it politely. Or, you may accept them, and pass them on to others. Outright rejecting a gift is an insult to the giver. You may have your principles about accepting or not accepting gifts. There is no need to be so gruff or dismissive. Of course, the next words he utters smoothens the situation greatly. But, gifts are not to be rejected so gruffly; that is ungentlemanly. Yet, when man evolves, it is seen that he invariably acquires this tendency; he can't brook fooling around. Nachiketa understood that Yama is not going to teach him about the Atman so easily. He will keep on beating around the bush. Hence, Nachiketa has to convince Yama that he is absolutely not interested in anything that he has to offer him, no matter how invaluable they be in the world's estimation. We saw this before; once the lower needs have been fulfilled, and the higher needs are awakened, the person's entire value system changes. It is natural that niceties of social interaction don't mean much for such a person. We should not understand that such exalted souls will be vulgar or gross. Far from it; they will exhibit freshness in their dealings. It will be very welcome. They won't have any of the formal pretensions in their dealings at all.

Sri Ramakrishna had met Raja Sourindra Tagore in Jadu Mallick's house. He explains, "*Many days later I went with Captain to see Raja Sourindra Tagore. As soon as I met him, I said, 'I can't address you as "Raja", or by any such title, for I should be telling a lie.'*" This is the same brusqueness that we see Nachiketa exhibit above.

Moving on with our Upanishad; in most other cases, Yama would certainly have felt insulted and would have dismissed the young boy summarily. But, in Nachiketa's case, he must have felt the ring of genuineness in the boy's demeanor. Persons like Yama, self-realized souls, are always on the lookout for genuine spiritual aspirants. And this young boy, wise beyond his age, was exhibiting unmistakable signs of maturity. And the expert eyes of Yama saw it. So Yama continued with the conversation.

He now says, "*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. Yea, 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 becomes 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! 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, realizes 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 realized 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."*

Fame is the last infirmity of noble souls. Nachiketa had passed the test with all gross items, all things of the senses, all things that could be experienced. But, man is capable of extremely subtle forms of experience. Approbation by our peers and elders is one such intoxication. It is extremely subtle. It is extremely grand. Society is strengthened by people who show deference to the opinions of others around them. It is a sought after quality in people. Our education system encourages us to foster this quality. We are taught to think and behave in such a way that people around us will approve of us and praise us. But, it is nevertheless a trap when it comes to realization of Atman. If we are hungry for praise and fame, we can never know the Atman. Yama administered a test to Nachiketa in this matter. He praised him to the skies. Many spiritual aspirants flounder at this subtle doorstep of fame, and fall down. Yama is the Lord of Death. He is a highly revered person. When such a person praises someone, it is a really great thing. People who receive such praise have every right to feel proud of themselves and their abilities. Moreover, many spiritual aspirants develop something called 'Spiritual egotism'. They start feeling, 'I am so pure; I am so spiritual; I don't see anyone better than me.' This is called 'Avyakta Ahamkara' in Sanskrit. It means 'unmanifested or hidden or perverted egotism'. Unless a person frees himself from that trap, he can't progress towards knowledge of the Atman. Swami Vivekananda writes in his 'Song of the Sannyasin': *Strike off thy fetters! Bonds that bind thee down, Of shining gold, or darker, baser ore; Love, hate – good, bad – and all the dual throng, Know, slave is slave, caressed or whipped, not free; For fetters, though of gold, are not less strong to bind; Then off with them, Sannyasin bold! Say - 'Om Tat Sat, Om!'*

Nachiketa's reply is very strange. He says, "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." We can clearly see an irritation in his voice now. This is the 4<sup>th</sup> time he has asked Yama to let him in on the knowledge of the Atman. Till now he was coaxing Yama, even wheedling, just as kids do when they demand something from their parents. But, this 4<sup>th</sup> time, he is almost saying, "O Lord of Death, I wish you could quit beating around the bush. Don't give me crap about Dharma and Adharma, about cause and effect. You know very well what I am asking for. If you really know the Atman, as people think you do, for that is your public image, then tell me about it. If not, then confess that you don't know. I will release

you from the boon.” Notice the usage of the words ‘*Tad vada*’; ‘Tell me That’. He doesn’t prefix or suffix his request this time with ‘please’, or ‘kindly’. It is very direct. Nachiketa is no ordinary boy. He has struggled sufficiently to get his answers from many teachers in the past. All of them fell short in his estimation. He knew the standard approaches of such teachers. They don’t know the Atman. Yet, they won’t confess their ignorance. They know the stock statements of the Upanishads. They will keep on parroting them one after the other. They will keep on weaving statements after statements, employing high sounding words. The inquirer will feel as though the teacher *is* explaining the subject, but there is something lacking in the inquirer because of which he is unable to get it. Nachiketa has seen many such teachers. With great expectation, he has taken all this trouble to meet Yama, with the express intent of knowing about the Atman. Things started off well in Yama’s house. He granted him 3 boons, unasked. The 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> boon went off very smoothly. But the recent behavior of Yama started looking shady to Nachiketa. Hence he blurted out, “Look here. Don’t talk to me of Dharma and Adharma or cause and effect. I know all that. I need to know something which is beyond Dharma and Adharma, beyond cause and effect. If you really know that, tell me. Else, let’s not waste each other’s time. I will release you from this boon, and I will be gone.” Intellectual knowledge of the Atman is not the same as experiencing the Atman, although it is much better than utter ignorance of the Atman. When we gain an intellectual grasp of the Atman, we feel joy, and we feel fulfilled to a certain extent. That state is better than knowing nothing at all about the Atman, which is my own true self. But after an intellectual grasp on the topic has been gained, a hunger starts within for experience. No amount of intellectual gymnastics will satisfy that hunger. That state is called ‘*Vyakulata*’ by Sri Ramakrishna. It is a glorious hunger of the soul.

There was a solid reason why Yama wanted to approach the subject matter through the graded manner of dealing with Dharma & Adharma. He specifically 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.” Most people have to pass through this graded path for achieving the Eternal. Perhaps, Yama planned to walk Nachiketa too along this path. In all probability, Yama himself had trod this path. But the impetuosity of Nachiketa challenged Yama seriously. Nachiketa had questioned Yama’s credentials! So, Yama gave his answer in a form that only an expert in spiritual life would understand. When he gave his answer in 11 crisp mantras, Nachiketa could not understand head or tail of that reply. Nachiketa is a genuine seeker. There is no doubt about that. Yama is convinced about that fact. But, when it comes to the experience of the Atman, genuine seeking alone is not enough. Preparation is essential. And no one can bypass this preparation, by any means. No amount of genuineness in our search will ever overcome the necessity of preparation needed to perceive the Atman. The graded path would have prepared Nachiketa. But he would have none of that! He wanted the Atman right here, right now. Well, Yama gave it. But, how will Nachiketa grasp it? We pointed out earlier that this phenomenon is repeated many times in history. We saw it in Krishna-Arjuna interaction, in Jesus-Peter interaction, and in Ramakrishna-Naren interaction. In each case, when a teacher like Yama meets a disciple like Nachiketa, the teacher gives the entire truth in the very 1<sup>st</sup> interaction. The teacher doesn’t hold back anything. But in almost every case, the student is unable to grasp it at first. Slowly, he undergoes refinement through spiritual practice and then reaches a stage when he can grasp what the teacher had said in their very first interaction.

Upon the 4<sup>th</sup> request, challenged by Nachiketa, Yama gave 11 crisp mantras, conveying four ideas, directly answering Nachiketa’s query about the status of man after death, about the Great Hereafter, about the Atman, and about that which lies beyond dualities of Dharma-Adharma or cause-effect.

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.*

Then Yama said: *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.*

Thereafter, Yama said: *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 tranquility 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 realized Atman as dwelling within impermanent bodies but Itself bodiless, vast and all—pervading, does not grieve.*

Lastly, Yama concluded by saying: *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 turned away from wickedness, who is not tranquil and subdued and whose mind is not at peace, cannot attain Atman. It is realized 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?*

It is our contention that the Upanishad ends here. Everything that Yama wanted to say is couched in these 11 short mantras. These words were Yama's life's essence. In all probability, when Yama had finished speaking, Nachiketa must have said, "I...don't get it." And that must have led Yama to elaborate about the Atman in four more chapters of mantras, comprising about 65 mantras. What does Yama explain in the remaining chapters of this Upanishad? Before we answer that, we must look a bit more closely at what answer he gave here, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, which we quoted above.

As we noted above, Nachiketa asks the 3<sup>rd</sup> boon four times. Each time, he words it slightly differently. The 1<sup>st</sup> time he asked to be taught about the mystery of death; when a man dies, does anything survive him or not. The 2<sup>nd</sup> time he asks for the knowledge of the Atman; even the gods have doubts about the Atman; so he requests Yama to teach him about the Atman. The 3<sup>rd</sup> time, he asks Yama to teach him about the Great Hereafter. And the 4<sup>th</sup> time, he asks to be taught about that which is other than Dharma & Adharma, and is other than all this cause and effect. Clearly, all these four things mean the same – what survives a man after death, the Atman, the Great Hereafter, and that which is other than the dualities of life. Nachiketa felt all these four things to be the same. Yama too felt that all these four are the same thing. Life in this world is governed by cause & effect. From this fundamental process, man has devised a system of Dharma & Adharma, which guides his life on earth. Then man dies. It doesn't matter whether a man has followed Dharma or has followed Adharma. In either case, he will die. What happens to him thereafter? Is the post-mortem situation dependent on how he has lived here on earth, or not? Implicit in these questions is the enigma of the death of a realized person. *Na pretya sanjna asti; na tasya prana utkramante.* If a man lives a life based on Adharma, he will reincarnate in one of the various forms of life, commensurate with the karmas he has earned for himself. If a man lives a life based on Dharma, he will go to the higher heavens, live there until his karmas are exhausted, then reincarnate as man. If a man lives a life of higher Dharma, as envisaged in the *Naachiketa Agni*, he will go to Brahma Loka, from where he will merge in Brahman eventually. What happens to a man who has realized Brahman right

here, while he was living amongst us? That is the crux of the 4<sup>th</sup> version of the question – teach me about that which is other than Dharma & Adharma, other than cause & effect. Nachiketa has been very crisp in his queries. He has been quite direct. Shouldn't the answer, too, have been equally crisp, and direct?

Yama did, indeed, give a very crisp and direct answer. But, the problem is – we don't understand his answer! We are reminded of that famous science fiction book 'The Hitchhiker's guide to the Galaxy' by Douglas Adams. There is a supercomputer called Deep Thought that has been asked to determine the answer to the 'ultimate question to life, the universe, and everything'. The supercomputer takes 7.5 million years to compute the answer as 42. When people see that answer, it makes no sense to them! Nachiketa's dilemma seems to be the same here! Yama gave out some wonderful ideas in answer to his question, and that answer made no sense to Nachiketa.

Yama says that the answer to all the four forms of Nachiketa's question is Om. Yes, that very sound symbol, Om, which is the goal declared by all the Vedas, that very sound symbol, Om, which all austerities aim at and which men desire when they lead the life of continence, that very sound symbol, Om, is the complete answer to your question. This eternal sound symbol Om is indeed Brahman. This eternal sound symbol is the Highest. Whosoever knows this eternal sound symbol 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. When Yama said these words, he must have been looking intently at Nachiketa's face. Seeing that there was no lighting up of knowledge in Nachiketa's eyes, he proceeded.

He then proceeded to say that the knowing Self, the Atman, 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. Again, he must have been looking intently at Nachiketa's face. Seeing that there was still no lighting up of knowledge in Nachiketa's eyes, he proceeded.

Thereafter, Yama said: *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 tranquility 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 realized Atman as dwelling within impermanent bodies but Itself bodiless, vast and all—pervading, does not grieve.*

Lastly, Yama concluded by saying: *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 turned away from wickedness, who is not tranquil and subdued and whose mind is not at peace, cannot attain Atman. It is realized 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?*

Why didn't Nachiketa grasp the knowledge of the Atman when Yama uttered these words? Nachiketa knew about Om. He had studied in his classes under his teachers. Om is taught in the Chandogya Upanishad, in the Taittiriya Upanishad and in the Mandukya Upanishad in great detail. He knew all the implications about that sound symbol. Yet, when Yama says that the complete answer to his question is the Om, Nachiketa does not understand it. Why?

Some Hindu philosophers (especially of the Kashmir Shaivism School) contend that man has two kinds of ignorance within himself. The 1<sup>st</sup> kind of ignorance is called *Bauddha Ajnana*, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> one is called *Paurusha Ajnana*. They may be roughly translated as intellectual ignorance, and existential ignorance, respectively. *Bauddha Ajnana* or intellectual ignorance may also be called conceptual ignorance, while *Paurusha Ajnana* or existential ignorance may also be called Causal ignorance or functional ignorance. Systematic study removes *Bauddha Ajnana*. Using all the data obtained through our study, applying logic to that data, models are created in our mind. These models will incorporate all the available data, establish their interconnections and lead to some predictions or outcomes arising from those models. The aim of this type of understanding is to eliminate all internal contradictions in the model generated in our mind. The resultant of this mental exercise is what is generally called knowledge. In other words, this is intellectual understanding. Intellectual understanding requires sufficient mental effort on our part. Our ancient philosophers found out long ago that there are no perfect mental models of reality. All models suffer from some internal contradictions. Hence they went ahead with their efforts and made a breakthrough at a much deeper level. They gained access to another method of obtaining knowledge. Knowledge obtained through this entirely different method removes *Paurusha Ajnana*, which is also called Causal ignorance or Functional ignorance. The Rishi Angirasa of the Mundaka Upanishad gave names for both these kinds of obtaining knowledge – *Apara Vidya* and *Para Vidya*, respectively. *Apara Vidya* generates *Aparam Jnanam*, which removes *Bauddha Ajnana*. *Para Vidya* generates *Param Jnanam*, which removes *Paurusha Ajnana*. Intellectual rigor is the pre-requisite of *Aparam Jnanam*. Perfect calming of the mind is the pre-requisite of *Para Jnana*. *Apara Vidya*, the method of obtaining *Aparam Jnanam* or mediate knowledge of Reality, delineates the procedure for developing intellectual vigor. *Para Vidya*, the method of obtaining *Param Jnanam* or immediate knowledge of Reality, delineates the procedure for completely stilling the mind. Moral life is essential for both *Vidyas*. Hence the moral virtues are called ‘*Saarva-bhauma-maha-vratam*’; universal qualities applicable all persons, at all times and under all conditions. All the personal qualifications required for obtaining *Aparam Jnanam* are valid for obtaining *Param Jnanam* too; the difference is just that when we aim for *Param Jnanam*, all those qualifications are required in a higher degree. Hence, purity of mind is a requirement for *Aparam Jnanam*; but higher purity is needed for *Param Jnanam*; similarly with all moral qualifications. This brings us to one of the fundamental ideas of Hindu spirituality, the idea of gradation. Hindu spirituality rests on the idea of gradation of ideals and gradation of methods or practices. There is a continuum in ideals and practices.

We have a clear understanding of the outcome of *Apara Vidya*. But, what is the outcome of *Para Vidya*? Yama says, “**Who but myself can know** that luminous Atman who rejoices and rejoices not?” A plausible way of understanding this statement of Yama could be that only Yama could know the luminous Atman, and none else can know the luminous Atman. If Yama were to say this about anything else other than the Atman, this understanding would have been correct. But, with respect to the Atman, this understanding would be far from correct. Why? Everything in this world can be known by me, and can be taught to another. The Atman doesn’t fall under this category. It can be **known by me**, but can never be taught to another. When we say it can be ‘known’ by me, we are forced to continue using the terms of reference we have always used. Knowing the Atman, the outcome of *Para Vidya*, is not ‘knowing’ in the regular sense of the term. It is a kind of perception with which we are not at all familiar, at present. It is most certainly a perception, but devoid of the involvement of mind. All perceptions we are familiar with occurs due to the involvement of the mind. There is a kind of perception that occurs without the

involvement of the mind. What is that perception? We do not have any means of describing that perception. All that can be said about it is ‘*Neti, neti*’, not this, not this. Whatever we present before you can be rejected as ‘not the Atman’, as ‘*neti, neti*’. Then, what is it?

Ten friends once went out on an adventure. They had to cross a river. They swam across the river. It was a wild river, with a rapid current. When they emerged out on the banks on the other side, they decided they would have a head count, just to make sure that everyone had indeed come across safely, and no one was swept away by the current. The 1<sup>st</sup> man started counting. He counted nine heads ‘out there’. He was aghast that one was missing. Seeing the calamity, another man started counting. He too counted nine heads ‘out there’ and confirmed that one man was indeed missing! This was repeated again and again. Everyone felt that some mistake was being done by the person who counted, and hence he himself would count afresh. But each person counted only the heads ‘out there’. At last, all confirmed that one was indeed missing. They were heartbroken. When they were weeping and wailing over the ‘loss’ of one of their friends, a passer-by stopped and asked them the reason for their sorrow. He immediately grasped the situation. He started counting loudly, touching each person and saying his count number out loud, and when he had counted the ninth man, one more was still remaining. He then placed his hand on the 10<sup>th</sup> person’s head and said, “You are the 10<sup>th</sup> person.”

*Apara Vidya* can give us all the nine persons. It is not equipped to give us the 10<sup>th</sup> person. All our perception is outward bound. In order to recognize oneself, we need to reverse the direction of flow of awareness. It has to turn back on oneself. We don’t have any faculty to do that. Mind has no ability to look back on itself. This is a very tricky situation. Man is capable of handling extremely complicated situations, making sense of almost anything that he wishes to understand, obtaining whatever he wishes to obtain in this world. But, Atman doesn’t fall under any of these. If we have no known means of knowing the Atman, perhaps Atman does not exist! This is a plausible conclusion people will draw. The Upanishads are very vocal in this matter.<sup>31</sup> For sure, it exists. Atman is *hidden* in the hearts of all living creatures. It is within me, as much as it is within you. But, it can be ‘seen’ only within me. I can infer its presence within you. But I can’t ‘see’ it within you. How do I ‘see’ it within me? Yama says, “*A man who is free from desires beholds the majesty of the Self through tranquility of the senses and the mind and becomes free from grief. Who but myself can know that luminous Atman who rejoices and rejoices not? The wise man, having realized Atman as dwelling within impermanent bodies but Itself bodiless, vast and all-pervading, does not grieve.*” Further, Yama reiterates the inability of all known means of obtaining knowledge in revealing the Atman. He says, “*This Atman cannot be attained by the study of the Vedas, or by intelligence, or by much hearing of sacred books.*” Then he says something which could create great confusion if not understood properly. He says, “*It is attained by him alone whom It chooses. To such a one, Atman reveals Its own form.*” This brings in an element of whimsicality into Para Vidya. But that is how it is! No one can help here. However, everyone can *try* to perceive the Atman. Saying this, again Yama adds, “*He who has not first turned away from wickedness, who is not tranquil and subdued and whose mind is not at peace, cannot attain Atman. It is realized only by following the trail of awareness.*”

Notice Yama specifies three different conditions for the discovery of the Atman. They are: 1) turning away from wickedness, 2) tranquil & subdued senses, and 3) peaceful mind. Mind is designed in

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<sup>31</sup> Acharya Shankara doesn’t lose a single opportunity of bringing up this objection, and clarifying his stand on the issue in many places in his various Bhashyas.

such a way that it is always active, many times even restless. It is always outward bound. It is always engaged in shadow-boxing with imaginary enemies, for survival. In fact, if it becomes calm, it feels like it is dying. And mind doesn't want to die. Intense training is required in order to convince the mind to calm down. We need the cooperation of the mind in this matter. Brute force in calming the mind down is counter-productive. In most cases, minds of the seekers are not fully convinced on this matter. It is almost like the mind had to be brainwashed into committing suicide, for that is what calming it down entails. The trick lies not in applying brute force, but in enticing the mind towards the benefit that lies in calming it down. Let us study our own mind and find out what does it want. It is always active; it is always scheming; it is always up to something; it is searching for something. What is it that it seeks? It wants to live forever; it doesn't want to die. Lot of its activity is aimed at this – living forever, forestalling annihilation. It wants to know everything, in general and in particulars, in terms of the universal and in minute details. Lot of its activity is aimed at this – an insatiable curiosity. It wants joy, happiness. Awareness flows through the mind and through the nerves and produces a residue of joy and sorrow. Mind is ever engaged in manipulating this flow of awareness through certain circuits which produce joy and avoiding certain other circuits that produce pain. An inordinately huge amount of its activity is aimed at this complex phenomenon. This area of its function involves considerations of belongingness with others, with possession of things, with fear and with attraction.

We saw that after Yama gave his answer in 11 terse mantras to Nachiketa, he spends a further 76 mantras in explaining something. In essence, all these remaining 76 mantras elaborate these issues that we delineated just now. Each and everything that our mind seeks for in the world is justified, or fulfilled, only in the Atman. The Atman embodies all that the mind seeks. The Atman is ever existent (it is *Sat*, *Satya*, *Satyasya satyam*). It never dies (it is *amritam*). The Atman is all-knowing (it is *Chit*, *Jnanam*). Nothing is hidden from it (it is *Sarvajna*, *sarvavid*). The Atman is all Bliss (it is *Anandam*). There is not the least trace of sorrow in it. Consequently, there is no fear in it (it is *Abhaya*), no separateness in it from everything else that exists (it is *Akhanda*, *Sarva*); it possesses everything that exists; it is the very source of all attraction. We will notice that Yama is repeatedly hovering around these three main ideas in the remaining 76 mantras of this Upanishad. Why is he doing that?

With all his brilliance, Nachiketa does not grasp Yama's reply because his mind is not prepared enough to calm down to the extent of experiencing the Atman. Let us recall the three conditions Yama gave for discovering the Atman – no wickedness in our personality, tranquil and subdued senses, and a calm mind. Surely Nachiketa had gone beyond wickedness. Surely he was controlled to an extraordinary extent in his senses. Certainly his mind was sharp, discerning and focused, and to a large extent, it must have been calm. At least his mind would have been calmer than the minds of the ordinary run of people in the world. Else, one can never exhibit the level of focus that Nachiketa exhibited repeatedly before Yama. And yet, we find Nachiketa unable to grasp Yama's terse answer. In such a case, one needs to repeatedly hammer down on the inevitability of discovering the Atman as the only fulfilment for all that the mind is seeking for. It was precisely for this reason that Yama had wanted to take Nachiketa along the graded path of Yajna, which Nachiketa had brusquely rejected.

If you put a frog into a pan of hot water, it jumps away. Suppose you put a frog in a pan of cold water, it stays there happily. Then, you can start a small fire beneath the pan. Gradually, the water gets hotter. But this time, the frog's body gets accustomed to the discrete increment in temperature. Finally,

the water starts to boil, and the frog doesn't register the actual temperature of water. It gets burned and dies.

There are many claims by many persons all through human history of experiencing the Atman merely by thinking repeatedly about it, or by special rituals, or by some other esoteric means. Such is not the truth, unfortunately. Man has to try sincerely, to first of all hear about the Atman. Having heard about the Atman variously, he will have to cogitate on it, convincing himself about its presence, as and in the manner revealed in the mantras of the Upanishads. Then he has to analyze his own life's experiences in the light of his settled understanding of the Atman. All through, he has to meditate on the conclusions he has drawn from his understanding of the Atman. If he does all these things, does he experience the Atman?<sup>32</sup> No. There is no guarantee. As Yama said, "*It is attained by him alone whom It chooses. To such a one, Atman reveals Its own form.*" But, it is impossible that the Atman is experienced by one who has not calmed down his mind to an extraordinary level. Thus, the apparent whimsicality involved in experiencing the Atman works in a unidirectional manner. With elaborate preparations, including unprecedented eagerness for the experience, and extraordinary intellectual understanding of the Atman, one *may or may not* experience the Atman, but, one without a supremely calm mind can *never* experience the Atman.

Psychologically, what happens when the mind is progressively made calmer? We know what happens when the mind is made progressively more and more concentrated. Mind can concentrate on anything it wishes; it may be a person, a phenomenon, a thing, anything at all. We get to know more about the object by concentrating the mind more and more on it. All knowledge is gained in this way only. Whenever man has known something, it has been in this way only. What is the relation between concentration of the mind and calmness of mind? Mind can function in many ways. It can be scattered. Usually we see this state of mind in small children. They are unable to hold their focus of attention onto anything for more than a few minutes. As the body grows, the mind generally starts developing the ability to hold its focus of attention on a chosen thing for longer and longer periods of time. What actually happens is the mind develops an ability to ignore inputs and demands on its attention and direct its attention onto chosen things. This ability to consciously direct its attention can be sharpened, heightened with practice, which is called as *Abhyasa* in Sanskrit. Developing a conscious control on directing awareness is a great achievement in a person. The key idea is 'conscious control'. Mind is a very powerful instrument. When we develop the ability to concentrate, the mind automatically develops the ability to get concentrated on things which we do not consciously choose. If we are unscientific, unsystematic, haphazard in our attempts at developing concentration of mind, we end up in danger. Concentrated minds are a double edged sword. They do give great insights to the person, but can also drag the person to forbidden areas of thought and feeling, which can be detrimental to oneself and others. Let us however notice that in both cases of concentration, the mind is quite focused. But a concentrated mind is not necessarily a calm mind. Of course, there is focus in such a mind; it is no longer a scattered mind; a mind that flows in a hundred directions restlessly. Nevertheless, it is not a calm mind. The mind that used to flow listlessly here and there is now flowing in a very focused manner, perhaps towards one

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<sup>32</sup> By the way, note how we keep on saying 'experiencing the Atman'? In all other cases, we would have used 'know the Atman'. There is a danger in using the word 'knowing the Atman', although it is not uncommon to see that usage in English translations of the Upanishads. Regarding the Atman, we can indeed 'know', but that would merely be a mental model regarding the Atman. It requires sufficient mental capacity and effort even to form a robust mental model of the Atman. But such a model would be next to useless. *Anubhuti* or experience is the term our Rishis have preferred with regard to the Atman. We also prefer that term.



object, or a set of things. But it is still flowing. A calm mind doesn't flow! That is the central issue here, the distinguishing feature.

How to stop the flowing of our attention? If we observe closely, we realize that the very nature of our mind is to flow. Mind is the instrument through which our attention flows. And Yama tells us that the one and only condition required for experiencing the Atman is that the mind should be calm.<sup>33</sup> So, now the question is – how does one calm one's mind? We know how to gather a scattered mind, we know how to focus the mind, and we know how to concentrate the mind. But how do we calm the mind? Obviously it must be a most complicated process to calm the mind! That is what we tend to believe. The fact is – it is really extremely very simple. Remove desires. That is all!

This phenomenon of Desirelessness is of paramount importance in Vedanta. There are innumerable terms to describe this one phenomenon, including *Shanta*, *samahita*, *pavitra*, *asanga*, *nihsanga*, *asparsha*, *nirodha*, *bhoga-trishna-santripiti*, *atrishna*, *atma-tripta*, *tathagatha*, *akama*, *atmakama*, etc. In fact, every practice that is categorized as spiritual practice, Sadhana, or Yoga, or Vidya, is aimed at achieving this one state of mind – calmness. The process of calming down the mind has been called 'Purification' in ancient Hindu spiritual literature. All the rituals preceding adoption of formal Sannyasa vows deal only with this purification. And there are so many rituals involved there! Yama gives the essence of all those purificatory practices in the next 13 mantras.

Yama says:

*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.*

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<sup>33</sup> Of course, even after the mind is calm, there is absolutely no guarantee that one will experience the Atman, for the Atman reveals itself only to one whom it chooses, as Yama specifically points out.

We need to look at some important ideas before we proceed to understand these mantras given by Yama. Nachiketa already knew a couple of things when he approached Yama with his 3<sup>rd</sup> boon. He knew that there is something called Atman in man, a spiritual core, deathless and birthless. His study of the Upanishads in his school had given him ideas about this Atman. He also knew what happens when a man dies. When a man dies, something within him leaves the body and manufactures another body. Nachiketa knew this piece of information from tradition, mainly. Nowhere is it mentioned in the Upanishads that someone had seen this phenomenon.<sup>34</sup> The Upanishads too subscribe to this theory, based on speculation.<sup>35</sup> Then, Nachiketa knew that there were discussions of the death of a realized soul, in the Brihadaranyaka and Taittiriya Upanishads. He couldn't square these three ideas in his mind logically. By definition, Atman doesn't come or go. Then you have to posit another entity called Jivatman or functional Atman, which operates in birth and death. Jivatman doesn't die or take birth, but is operational in birth and death. This is quite a decent explanation of the human phenomenon. But, what happens during the death of a realized soul? What happens to his Jivatman?

So, when we present the 3<sup>rd</sup> boon in this format, Nachiketa's question seems to be a pretty straight-forward question. A simple question warrants a simple answer. But, it is very difficult to make sense of Yama's answer. Why is that?

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<sup>34</sup> Sri Ramakrishna saw it twice clearly! Once, when one of his relatives passed away, he saw the jiva leave the body behind. Then in Kashi, at the Dashaswamedha Ghat, he saw Mahadeva release the jiva of a dead person.

<sup>35</sup> Complete Works: Vol-1: Lectures & Discourses: *Soul, God & Religion*: This idea of reincarnation runs parallel with the other doctrine of the eternity of the human soul. Nothing which ends at one point can be without a beginning and nothing that begins at one point can be without an end. We cannot believe in such a monstrous impossibility as the beginning of the human soul. The doctrine of reincarnation asserts the freedom of the soul.

Also Cf: Complete Works: Vol-2: Jnana Yoga: Ch-XI: *The Microcosm*: **This idea of reincarnation is most essential for the moral well-being of the human race.** It is the **only logical conclusion** that thoughtful men can arrive at. If you are going to exist in eternity hereafter, it must be that you have existed through eternity in the past: it cannot be otherwise...Are there any arguments, any rational proofs for this reincarnation of the soul? There are; and most valid ones, too. No other theory except that of reincarnation, accounts for the wide divergence that we find between man and man, in their powers to acquire knowledge...I will bring before you one more point with regard to this theory of reincarnation. It is the theory that advances the freedom of the human soul. It is the one theory that does not lay the blame of all our weakness upon somebody else, which is a common human fallacy.

Also Cf: Complete Works: Vol-2: *The Religion of Buddha*: Reincarnation seems to me to be the nearest to a logical explanation for many things with which we are confronted in the realm of religion. **But I do not advance it as a doctrine. It is no more than a theory at best, and is not susceptible of proof except by personal experience,** and that proof is good only for the man who has it. Your experience is nothing to me, nor mine to you. I am not a believer in miracles – they are repugnant to me in matters of religion. You might bring the world tumbling down about my ears, but that would be no proof to me that there was a God, or that you worked by his agency, if there was one. I must, however, believe in a past and a hereafter as necessary to the existence of the present. And if we go on from here, we must go in other forms, and so comes any belief in reincarnation. **But I can prove nothing, and any one is welcome to deprive me of the theory of reincarnation provided they will show me something better to replace it.** Only up to the present I have found nothing that offers so satisfactory an explanation to me.

Also Cf: Complete Works: Vol-4: Writings: Prose: *Reincarnation*: This is an entire article Swamiji wrote for the Metaphysical Journal.

Also Cf: Complete Works: Vol-5: Notes from Lectures & Discourses: *On the Vedanta Philosophy*: The Vedantist says that a man is neither born nor dies nor goes to heaven, and that **reincarnation is really a myth with regard to the soul.** The example is given of a book being turned over. It is the book that evolves, not the man. Every soul is omnipresent, so where can it come or go? These births and deaths are changes in nature which we are mistaking for changes in us. Reincarnation is the evolution of nature and the manifestation of the God within. The Vedanta says that each life is built upon the past, and that when we can look back over the whole past we are free. The desire to be free will take the form of a religious disposition from childhood. A few years will, as it were, make all truth clear to one. After leaving this life, and while waiting for the next, a man is still in the phenomenal.

Although the problem has been presented in a very logical format, the answer does not lie in the same logical framework as the question. The answer lies in a framework that is different from the one in which the question was presented. The answer cannot be presented as a logical extension of the question, which is how we generally deal with issues in this world. In this one case – when a man dies, does anything survive him or not – the answer lies in lifting the vision of the questioner to a level higher than the level from which he had raised that question. In other words, the answer to this question cannot be formulated in words. The answer lies in dissolving the question itself. That is why Yama says, “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.” We are accustomed to some methods of obtaining knowledge, and to some processes of experiencing the world. None of these can ever reveal the Atman to us. A unique method of perception has to be opened up for experiencing the Atman. There is a highly calibrated technique for opening up this unique method of perception.

How did our ancient Rishis discover this unique method of perception? We do not know. There are no records available in any of our ancient scriptures. But, innumerable, authentic instances are recorded in the Upanishads and later spiritual literature, of persons who developed this unique method of perception and solved the question for themselves. Uncannily similar records exist in Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Sufi traditions too. In the dozens of Hindu spiritual traditions that lie outside the Upanishadic traditions, such as Yoga, Tantra, and Bhakti schools too, we find innumerable instances of persons achieving this unique type of perception. But, except in the Upanishadic tradition, in every other case, the description of the processes leading to this unique type of perception is heavily couched in their respective cultural terms and idioms, rendering them unintelligible and useless to persons belonging to other cultural backgrounds. We just saw that Yama too wanted to take Nachiketa along a graded path, which was again deeply entrenched in a culture which is non-existent now. We Indians, living in the same land as Yama and Nachiketa do not recognize that culture any longer. Fire sacrifices are no longer performed by Indians. The final form of the answer that Yama gave, however, is independent of any cultural baggage. So, this form of the answer has been termed as Vedanta. Everything recorded in the Upanishad is not called Vedanta. Only those conclusions, that are presented independent of any cultural idioms, form Vedanta. These conclusions are expressed purely in terms of man, and there is no reference to any cultural construct such as God, or rituals, or mythology. The final conclusions in the Upanishads are often expressed purely in terms of man’s regular daily experiences, which are universal. If those conclusions are expressed in terms of God, or God’s grace, or some ritual, or with reference to some mythology, people belonging to a different culture wouldn’t be able to make sense of it. In our Hindu spiritual literature, even in the Upanishads, there are many instances where the final conclusions are expressed in terms of various cultural constructs. All those passages are today lost to our understanding because we do not have any reference to their cultural basis. Some rishis of the Upanishads were able to free their final conclusions about man by factoring in the concept of Pure Consciousness. These rishis, and there are quite a few of them, personally perceived Pure Consciousness. And they discovered a sound symbol ‘Om’ to stand for that concept of Pure Consciousness.

This conception of Pure Consciousness within man, and association of Om with consciousness, both are devoid of any cultural accretions. What do we mean? Take modern science, for instance. Every discovery or invention springs from a person belonging to some particular country, or religion, or race, or gender, or time period. But, once the discovery or invention has been made, it becomes the property of all

humanity. The principle, or law, or phenomenon that has been discovered, or the process or gadget that has been invented does not carry the distinguishing characteristic of its originator, at all. Of all the ideas and techniques available in the Upanishads, these two – Pure Consciousness within man, and Om – belong to that category. These two don't belong to Hinduism alone. They are common to all humanity.

How does Om stand for Pure Consciousness? Om indicates affirmation, acknowledgement about the thing. If someone asks you, 'Does such a thing exist?' and if you reply 'Om', you have effectively said, 'Yes, it does exist.' Just as, in English, when we say, 'Yes', we actually means, 'Yes, that is true, or that is right', in a similar way, Om is a short-form for 'Om, tat sat', which means, 'Om, That Infinite Existence.' There is however, one major difference between 'Yes', and 'Om'. The Sanskrit Om indicates the Infinite Existence with reference to oneself. What does this mean? Let us explain this a little bit. Modern students of Vedanta usually get stumped at this very point.

Whenever we speak of the Infinite or about the Ultimate Reality, we generally think in terms of the infinite 'out there', or the Ultimate Reality 'out there'. No doubt the Ultimate Reality is 'out there' too. Otherwise, how does one account for this wonderful variegated world that we perceive? But, the ancient Rishis discovered an amazing piece of fact. I am also a part of this wonderful variegated world! Hence, the Ultimate Reality that exists in the world 'out there' should exist 'in here' also! Again, limitation of language muddles up the thought. When the Rishis say 'in here', it means the core of my self. Again, the mode of thought we are accustomed to till now creates an obstacle in grasping the intent of the Rishis. When we say 'in here' or 'core of my self', we are apt to think of a vast unknown space within ourselves, which we see as dark, when we close our eyes to the world 'out there'. This vast unknown space within ourselves too is 'out there' in comparison to what is indicated by the Rishis by that word 'Om'. The nearest imagery to explain this is that of the movie on a movie-screen. Consider the movie screen in a movie theatre such as Inox. There is continuous drama happening on the screen. When the movie is going on, we see every possible activity being enacted on the screen. It is just light rays falling on a PVC sheet, getting reflected back to our eyes, and our mind supplies depth. If you analyze, there is no depth on the screen. It is 2D. We interpret the images as 3D. Further, we interpret the succession of images as time, due to persistence of vision. Even though we know all this, when we get engrossed in the movie, it affects us profoundly, as if we are participants in it. Now, analyze this situation for a moment from the point of view of the screen, over which all this is happening. Is the screen burnt when there is a fire in the movie? Is the screen cut in half, when the hero uses a sword in the movie? The screen is utterly unaffected by whatever happens in the movie. The screen is thus utterly 'unattached' to the movie. But can we say that the screen is not connected to the movie in any way? No, we can't say that. But for the screen, where would the movie be? How would we see the movie? What is the distance between the movie and the screen? They are practically identical. Yet, when we talk of the movie and the screen, we always say that the screen is 'behind' the movie. This is due to the limitation of language that we referred to above. The relation between the Ultimate Reality and the core of my self is similar to this screen-movie analogy. It is not the same, but it is similar.

There are some principles that are implicit in the Upanishads. We need to identify them before we proceed.

1. We see the beautiful world. It exists. **Anything that exists must do so to cater to someone.** Usually that 'someone' is the master of that thing that exists for his utility. In most cases, the

master is also the one who ‘created’ that thing, or who brought it to ‘existence’ in its present form. This is a fundamental principle in the Upanishad.

2. Nothing exists forever. All existence is temporal. The timelines vary. What we consider as ‘eternal’ is usually a very, very, really long time period; that is all. So, everything that exists must have come into existence at some point in time and space, continues to exist now, and will cease to exist at some later point of time. So, **anything that exists falls under this tri-phenomenal process – coming into existence, continuing to exist, and ceasing to exist.** We must note however, that coming into existence means coming into existence in its present form only. Hence we do not use the term ‘creation’ or ‘dissolution’. These western concepts generally imply coming into existence from nothing. Upanishads do not subscribe to that idea at all. ‘Nothing’ cannot bring about something into existence. Only change of forms is allowed. Total dissolution is not allowed.
3. Since it is common knowledge that the world exists, there must be a fundamental reality ‘out there’ that appears as the world. Although the things in the world are all constantly changing their forms, something remains always. **That reality behind the world out there is called Brahman.**
4. **Brahman must be a living entity**, since it has a will of its own, since it exhibits actions of its own, since it responds to us, living beings, through prayer and supplications.
5. I am an integral part of this world. I am a living being. I am aware and I have life. **I exist in three distinct modes of awareness – waking, dream, and deep sleep.** I must have something within me that doesn’t die when I die. **There must be something permanent in me, an inextinguishable reality. That is called Atman.**
6. Since I can interact with three different worlds when I am in three different modes of awareness, **I can deduce that Brahman also has three different modes of existence, each corresponding to my three selves.**
7. No matter how I look at it, the reality within me is in some way related to the reality behind the world. So there is some correlation between Atman and Brahman. Hence, **if I get to know Atman, I should be able to get to know Brahman too.**
8. So, Brahman has three modes of existence; Atman has three modes of existence. The sound symbol Om also has three constituents – A, U, and M. (The rules of Sanskrit phonetics require that when the vowels A & U are uttered one after the other, it will sound as O; then there is the consonant M, forming Om.) we can therefore correlate these sets of threes for easy reference. **Thus, Vishwa, Taijasa & Prajna (the three modes in which I exist) are correlated to Virat, Hiranyagarbha & Purusha (the three modes in which Brahman exists), which are also correlated to A, U & M of Om.**
9. Pure Consciousness exists in all the three modes of Vishwa, Taijasa & Prajna. Pure Consciousness exists beyond these three modes, independently too. Hence it is denoted by the term **Turiya**. Does Om have a correlation to this Turiya? Yes, it does. Om emanates from silence and merges back into silence. Silence pervades all sound. Hence **the silence before, after, and during uttering Om represents the Turiya.**
10. Using this model of the three modes of consciousness, every human experience has been accounted for, except the phenomenon of death. **Death is the 5<sup>th</sup> mode in which consciousness exists.**

11. **Shorn of the minute details, Atman, Brahman and Om are equivalent.** Whatever else this reality may be, it is certainly conscious, for, consciousness is irreducible into anything else other than itself. Thus Atman is Brahman is Om and it is pure consciousness.

Using these principles, the Upanishads present their ideas which are unique in the entire world of human knowledge. We say they are unique because, they have explained the reality behind the world and the reality within me from something that is irreducible, pure consciousness. That is one of the fundamental principles of science – the principle of parsimony or Occam’s razor.

The Upanishads present the simplest form of their unique discovery: *Ayam Atma Brahma*; this Atman is Brahman. If this simple statement satisfies the disciple, and he experiences the Atman, the story ends. That is what Yama said in answer to Nachiketa. Om is the answer. It however did not satisfy the boy. What could be the reason for not being satisfied with this answer? The question still remains – if my real nature is indeed the ultimate reality of this infinite world, why do I not feel so? So the Upanishads present their 2<sup>nd</sup> level of explanation in the form of the Two-bird analogy.

If this two-birds analogy doesn’t satisfy the disciple, the Upanishads present many 3<sup>rd</sup> level explanations including the Three-Gunas model, the Ashwattha Tree model, the Ratha-Rathin model, the Puri-Purisha model, the Deha-Dehin model, and the Projection-withdrawal model (in two variations of triplication & quintiplication.) If none of these is satisfactory, then the Upanishads fall back onto theological models, which are the 4<sup>th</sup> level models. But whatever be the model employed, one has to end up with the simplest form of expressing the conclusion of the Upanishads – this Atman is Brahman.

We must bear in mind that since the conclusion is invariable, any model that suits our temperament is allowed. There is no effort even to make one model compatible with the others. Extremely divergent and variant models therefore exist side by side in the Upanishads, with no quarrel amongst them.

Implicit in all of these models is a very specific hierarchy of the human personality. The sense organs are always the starting point of this hierarchy. The sense objects (Virat) lie beyond & behind their organs. The Great Mind (Hiranyagarbha, which is the sum-total of all minds) lies beyond & behind the objects. The Unmanifest (Ishwara or the Shakti of Brahman) lies beyond & behind the Great Mind. Brahman lies beyond & behind the Unmanifest. All spiritual practices distill down into merging the former into the subsequent latter level of Reality. Thus the senses are merged in the objects. The objects are merged in Hiranyagarbha. Hiranyagarbha is merged into Ishwara, and Ishwara into Brahman. This merging process is called Yoga, or Vidya. Notice that the merging process merely follows the trail of awareness throughout until Pure Awareness is reached. Pure Awareness cannot be merged into anything further. The irreducible has been reached. Thus, Yoga gives an *experience* of the Atman.

Even after all this explanation, Nachiketa does not get it. We don’t have any particular mantra in the Upanishad that specifically says Nachiketa did not get it. There is every possibility that a brilliant boy like Nachiketa could very well have gotten it by now. But, if that was the case, Yama should have closed his teaching. He continues for four more chapters, which makes us suspect that Nachiketa was still clueless.

In the remaining mantras Yama tries variously to explain the unexplainable. His efforts are unparalleled in known history of literature, secular or spiritual. There are many mantras which end in ‘*etat vai tat*’ – ‘This is verily That’; some more mantras that use the term ‘*angushtamaatram*’ – ‘as big as the thumb’; some others speak of ‘*guhaam*’ – ‘hidden in the heart’. Yama uses a whole lot of imageries, similes and metaphors from daily life to try to point out the Atman and explain the Atman. Yama continues his preliminary exposition of the Atman with the 2<sup>nd</sup> level model of the Two-birds model. He says, “*Two there are who dwell within the body, in the intellect, the supreme akāsa 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.*”

This mantra is the foundation of the study of the 3<sup>rd</sup> aspect of human personality, which is the unique and the greatest contribution of Upanishads to the fund of human knowledge. This model speaks of two entities living inside the human personality. Both these entities are identical in all respects, except in one respect, and that is that one of them is self-contained, full of light, and utterly unattached, but extremely alert, and the other is restless, a shadow of the former, and deeply involved in experiencing the world through the mind and senses. Every action, every experience, every thought & feeling pushes the 2<sup>nd</sup> bird towards the 1<sup>st</sup>, and eventually the 2<sup>nd</sup> bird merges in the 1<sup>st</sup> bird. The experience after that merger is what Yama has been explaining till now, using the symbol of Om.

The psychology of how the 2<sup>nd</sup> bird reaches up to the 1<sup>st</sup> bird is explained using the chariot imagery. “*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.*” The atman, who is the master of the chariot, is the 1<sup>st</sup> bird. With a strong & healthy chariot, equipped with strong and disciplined horses under the direction of Buddhi, the charioteer, the 1<sup>st</sup> bird can reach the 2<sup>nd</sup> bird and merge in him.

How does this happen? “*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.*” This is the greatest, and the most unique contribution of ancient India to the fund of human knowledge. This process of merging the senses in his mind, that mind in the intellect, and that intellect in the Cosmic Mind, and finally that Cosmic Mind in the Atman is a graded transformation of one’s self-identity. The Sanskrit terms used by Yama are very revealing. The intellect could have been

called Buddhi by Yama, but he doesn't. He calls it the 'Jnana-atman'. The Cosmic Mind could have been called the Mahat, but he doesn't. He called it the 'Mahat-atman'. And the final goal could have been called 'Purusha', but he doesn't. He calls it the 'Shanta-atman'. Note how each entity is called atman, or self. This act of merging one entity into another is an actual fact of merger. It is not figure of speech. Each of these mergers has tremendous consequences on the personality. For instance, when the 'Jnana-atman' is merged in the 'Mahat-atman', revolutionary consequences are seen in, and experienced by, the person undergoing them. One consequence is recorded in Swamiji's life as follows:

*On the eve of leaving them, the Swami met Turiyananda. Of this meeting, Swami Turiyananda said later: "I vividly remember some remarks made by Swamiji at that time. The exact words and accents, and the deep pathos with which they were uttered, still ring in my ears. He said, 'Haribhai, I am still unable to understand anything of your so-called religion.' Then with an expression of deep sorrow on his countenance and intense emotion shaking his body, he placed his hand on his heart and added, 'But my heart has expanded very much, and I have learnt to feel. Believe me, I feel intensely indeed.' His voice was choked with feeling; he could say no more. For a time profound silence reigned, and tears rolled down his cheeks." In telling of this incident Swami Turiyananda was also overcome. He sat silent for a while, his eyelids heavy with tears.*

*Swami Turiyananda relates another incident indicative of the profound love for all men that there was in the Swami's heart. It happened after his first visit to America. It took place at Balaram Bose's home in Calcutta, where the Swami was staying for a time. Swami Turiyananda said: "I came to see Swamiji and found him walking alone on the veranda lost in such deep thought that he did not perceive my arrival. I kept quiet, lest I should interrupt his reverie. After some time Swamiji, with tears rolling down his cheeks, began to hum a well-known song of Mirabai. Then, with his face in his hands and leaning on the railings, he sang in anguished tones, 'Oh, nobody understands my sorrow! Nobody understands my sorrow!' The sad strains, and Swamiji's dejection, seemed to affect even the objects around him! The whole atmosphere vibrated with the sad melody: 'No one but the sufferer knows the pangs of sorrows.' His voice pierced my heart like an arrow, moving me to tears. Not knowing the cause of Swamiji's sorrow I was very uneasy. But it soon flashed upon me that it was a tremendous universal sympathy with the suffering and oppressed that was the cause of his mood."* <sup>36</sup> This intense feeling is not an emotion. It is what happens when one has become identified with the Mahat. Such a person, when he says 'I', clearly feels that he is the Cosmic Person, and his own mind is the Cosmic Mind!

When Sri Ramakrishna was suffering from severe throat pain, his disciples once asked him to pray to the Divine Mother, so that she could alleviate the pain. He would generally not accede to such requests. But this one time, he agreed. He prayed to the Divine Mother saying, "Mother, can you reduce this pain in my throat? I am unable to eat." The Divine Mother replied showing all the people around him, "But, don't you eat through all these mouths?" Such is the practical implication of identifying oneself with the Mahat!

We may mention here in passing that of all these entities that Yama speaks of – senses, mind, intellect, Mahat, and Atman – the key to understanding the whole thought-structure is Mahat. Unless we understand what is meant by Mahat, we will never be able to grasp this philosophy. Swamiji has devoted a lot of his time, while lecturing in the West, to really elaborating this concept of Mahat. We have

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<sup>36</sup> *Life of Swami Vivekananda: Eastern & Western disciples: Pp: 390-391*



elsewhere made a collation of most of those references, for the benefit of students of Swamiji's thoughts.<sup>37</sup>

It is only by progressively expanding our self-identity from our individual body to our body-mind, then to Buddhi, then to Mahat, and finally to Brahman that we can solve the problem of death. When my self-identity has shifted to Brahman, body will die, mind will die, but I won't be experiencing death. I will certainly be aware of this body falling down, but I am no longer identified with it exclusively. I am identified with everything – the body that is falling down, with the pranas that are getting merged with the Maha-Prana, with the mind that is getting merged with Mahat, with all the other beings that are taking birth, living, and dying, with everything that exists. I am not affected by the death of one body, even though not so long ago, it was the whole world for me! The wonderful book '*Graceful Exits – How great beings die*' by Sushila Blackman records the death of a hundred enlightened persons. It is worth reading, at least to understand this idea of the utterly transformed self-identity of a realized soul.

One more point before we proceed. Note the two statements made by Yama here: "*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.*" And "*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.*" In the 1<sup>st</sup> mantra, Yama delineates the hierarchy of entities, and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> mantra, he describes merger of each lower entity into the next higher one. Note that he mentions the 'Unmanifest' or 'Avyakta' in the 1<sup>st</sup> mantra and leaves it out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> mantra. This Unmanifest is the Power of Brahman, the Brahma-Shakti, which enables the merger of senses in the mind, of the mind into Buddhi, of the Buddhi into Mahat, and of the Mahat into Brahman. Sri Ramakrishna says, "*You may feel a thousand times that it is all magic; but you are still under the control of the Divine Mother. You cannot escape Her. You are not free. You must do what She makes you do. A man attains Brahmajnana only when it is given to him by the Adyashakti, the Divine Mother. Then alone does he see the whole thing as magic; otherwise not. As long as the slightest trace of ego remains, one lives within the jurisdiction of the Adyashakti. One is under Her sway. One cannot go beyond Her. With the help of the Adyashakti, God sports as an Incarnation. God, through His Sakti, incarnates Himself as man. Then alone does it become possible for the Incarnation to carry on His work, Everything is due to the Sakti of the Divine Mother.*" This entire Yoga process is governed by the grace of Avyakta or Brahma-Shakti. It is the Brahma-Shakti who enables Yoga to occur. That is also the reason that Yama said, "*It is attained by him alone whom It chooses. To such a one Atman reveals Its own form.*" Recall Sri Ramakrishna's words: "*One can attain the Knowledge of Brahman, too, by following the path of bhakti. God is all-powerful. He may give His devotee Brahmajnana also, if He so wills.*" We now realize why Yama had said that the Atman can be realized only by the grace of the Atman.

Having spelt out the process of Yoga, Yama makes a statement that seems to be out of place. "*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.*" Nachiketa has done all that is humanly possible to unravel the mystery of the Atman. Why is Yama saying this now? Swamiji clarifies this point as follows: "*Now, if there is any one amongst you who really wants to study this science, he will have to start with that sort of determination, the same as, nay even more than, that which he puts into any business of life. And what an amount of attention does business require, and what a rigorous taskmaster it is! Even if the father, the mother, the wife, or the child dies, business cannot stop! Even if the*

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<sup>37</sup> Please see: ..... '*What is Mahat? In the words of Swami Vivekananda*'

*heart is breaking, we still have to go to our place of business, when every hour of work is a pang. That is business, and we think that it is just, that it is right. This science calls for more application than any business can ever require. Many men can succeed in business; very few in this; because so much depends upon the particular constitution of the person studying it. As in business all may not make a fortune, but everyone can make something, so in the study of this science each one can get a glimpse which will convince him of its truth and of the fact that there have been men who realized it fully. This is the outline of the science. It stands upon its own feet and in its own light, and challenges comparison with any other science. There have been charlatans, there have been magicians, there have been cheats, and more here than in any other field. Why? For the same reason, that the more profitable the business, the greater the number of charlatans and cheats. But that is no reason why the business should not be good.”*

Why is this process dangerous? Two reasons: One: Charlatans and cheats abound in this field. We may easily get misdirected. Great care is needed. Two: When the Buddhi is made extremely alert, and the sensory and mental apparatus are made focused and concentrated, there is the danger of getting extremely caught up in sensory and mental experiences, and then we miss the mark. When the self-identity is manipulated and changed, if improper methods are followed, one loses what one already has and doesn't get what one ought to get. There are even cases of people getting mentally deranged due to improper processes. One of the most important conditions for bringing about these self-identity transformations is strict Brahmacharya. All the spiritual scriptures, all over the world, specify this in common. Without strict Brahmacharya, in some cases, one may, at the most, gain an intellectual understanding of this entire process, but actual transformation of self-identity is impossible. That happens only when Akhanda Brahmacharya is established in one's personality.<sup>38</sup>

The way forward seems to be like this: We should get convinced that Atman exists, and that too, not out there, but in us; the entire sensory & mental apparatus should be purified and made calm and silent; Buddhi must be awakened to extreme levels of alertness; the grace of the Atman should fall upon us; and all these are not a one-time occurrence; they are iterative. During one such iteration of these processes, we shall experience the Atman. Then what happens? Yama says, “*Having realized Atman, which is soundless, intangible, formless, undecaying and likewise tasteless, eternal and odorless; having realized That which is without beginning and end, beyond the Great and unchanging – one is freed from the jaws of death.*” The danger exists, no doubt; but by following all the above mentioned processes in an iterative manner, we can reach the desired goal. Notice that here Yama is referring directly to death, which was asked by Nachiketa and had prompted all this discussion. Notice also how Yama doesn't solve Nachiketa's dilemma, but essentially dissolves it. If one experiences the Atman, one goes beyond death. If one goes beyond death, wherefrom arises the question if anything continues after death or not? Some may object that Yama did not actually answer Nachiketa's question. The ancient Hindu rishis were bold and honest enough to acknowledge that they did not know the answer. Just because someone can frame a nice question does not necessarily mean that it will have an answer. Sometimes, you will need to dissolve the question itself, since you cannot resolve it. Dissolving the question is the way to answer some questions. Suppose you dreamt that you had a million dollars. After waking up, if you ask, where you should invest that money, would it make sense? Swamiji pointed this out characteristic of Hindu philosophy in his Paper on Hinduism which he presented in the Parliament of Religions. He said, “*We have been told that the Hindus shirk the question and say that no such question can be there. Some thinkers want to answer it by positing one or more*

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<sup>38</sup> The interested reader may kindly refer 'Youth & Vitality' by Swami Purushottamananda, published by Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Belgaum, for details about Brahmacharya.

*quasi-perfect beings, and use big scientific names to fill up the gap. But naming is not explaining. The question remains the same. How can the perfect become the quasi-perfect; how can the pure, the absolute, change even a microscopic particle of its nature? But the Hindu is sincere. He does not want to take shelter under sophistry. He is brave enough to face the question in a manly fashion; and his answer is: 'I do not know. I do not know how the perfect being, the soul, came to think of itself as imperfect, as joined to and conditioned by matter.' But the fact is a fact for all that. It is a fact in everybody's consciousness that one thinks of oneself as the body. The Hindu does not attempt to explain why one thinks one is the body. The answer that it is the will of God is no explanation. This is nothing more than what the Hindu says, 'I do not know.'*"

Then the Upanishad brings in two mantras, which effectively mean that the teaching is over. *"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, practicing self—control, recites the supreme secret in an assembly of Brahmins or at an after-death ceremony obtains thereby infinite rewards. Yea, he obtains infinite rewards."*

But the Upanishad records three chapters more of teaching by Yama. We may speculate like this: All that was told till now must have happened in the very 1<sup>st</sup> sitting of Nachiketa with Yama. Nachiketa must have stayed on in Yama's house for a couple more days. During those days, Yama must have uttered the following mantras by way of explaining the unexplainable Atman to Nachiketa. This is very natural between Guru and disciple.

Yama begins the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the Upanishad by describing the human condition in an amazing manner. He 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 unshakable Immortality is, do not covet any uncertain thing in this world."*

Then Yama begins to explain the Atman using various everyday experiences. Although the Atman cannot be pointed out as 'this is It', the Atman can still be hinted at using anything that exists since It is the very source of all existence. The Atman is there in every possible experience known to us: *"It is through Atman that one knows form, taste, smell, sounds, touches and carnal pleasures. Is there anything that remains unknown to Atman? This, verily, is That. It is through Atman that one perceives all objects in sleep or in the waking state. Having realized 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, verily, is That."*

Every student of Hindu philosophy is well acquainted with the ideas of Hiranyagarbha, as well as the shining ones (known as Devas, or gods). The Atman is present in, through and behind all these ideas: *"He verily 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, verily, is That. He verily 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, verily, is That."*

Every Hindu, in the ancient days, worshipped the gods and God, using Fire. This Atman is there in, through and behind that Fire and the worship: *"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, verily, is That.”*

The Atman is there in, through and behind the Sun and all natural forces (also called Devas or gods): *“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, verily, is That.”*

In other words, the world experienced by the 2<sup>nd</sup> bird is essentially the same as the world experienced by the 1<sup>st</sup> bird. There is no difference. We better *not see* any difference. If we do see differences, then pain, misery, and death are consequences. If we prepare ourselves, i.e. if we purify our mind so as to see no difference whatsoever, we go beyond sorrow and death. The scheme is that simple! *“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 realized; then one does not see in It any multiplicity whatsoever. He goes from death to death who sees multiplicity in It. This, verily, 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 verily 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.”*

It is common knowledge that I am the 2<sup>nd</sup> bird. The 1<sup>st</sup> bird is the Purusha, or the Atman. I know where I am, in this body-mind complex. But where is the 1<sup>st</sup> bird located? *“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, verily, 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, verily, is That.”*

Yama now brings in two standard 3<sup>rd</sup> level models for explaining the Atman. He starts with the Deha-Dehin model: *“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, verily, is That.”*

Although the Atman resides in this body, we must remember that the Atman simultaneously is everywhere outside too. This is one of the greatest quantum leaps in human understanding that was achieved by the ancient rishis. The Reality behind this entire universe and the Reality behind my own existence are one and the same. *“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.”*

Having reminded Nachiketa of this fundamental equality in Reality, or solidarity of existence, as Swamiji loves to call it, Yama proceeds to explain the Atman in terms of our human condition, as present in the human mechanism: *“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, verily, 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, verily, 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 realize that indescribable Supreme Joy as ‘This is That.’ How can I realize 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.”*

Yama now begins with another of the 3<sup>rd</sup> level models to explain the Atman – the Ashwattha Tree model. This is an amazing model used by the ancient rishis to explain the Atman and this world. What we see is the solid world outside of us, and all the subtle entities such as mind and consciousness within us. From this, we naturally feel that this world has given rise to mind and consciousness. This present human condition needs to be turned over its head, for such is the actual truth of all existence. The root is consciousness. From that arises mind. And from that arises body. The whole vision is actually inverted at present. Atman is the prime mover, and the world is the moved, not the other way round! *“This is that eternal Ashwattha 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, verily, 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 realize Brahman here, before the falling asunder of his body, then he is liberated; if not, he is embodied again in the created worlds.”*

Yama then describes the quality of perception that occurs in various worlds or lokas. This is another idea that was very widespread in ancient India, that the soul can live in many spheres of existence. This world that we inhabit is but one of the many possible worlds in which we can live. No matter which world we inhabit, perception follows the same rule. What is that rule? Reality splits itself into three parts, as it were; the perceiver, the perceived, and the act of perception. The Atman splits itself into this triad everywhere. Yama explains that the perception of the Atman in the Buddhi, i.e. in this world, as being similar to perceiving something in a mirror. Perception is very clear, but we do not perceive the thing in itself, only an image. But clarity is its chief characteristic. That is how all our perceptions occur in this world. The reality of this world is obvious. Perception is so clear here. Then, there is the World of the Fathers. There, perception is vivid in particulars, but hazy in general. And so on.: *“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.”*

Recall the iterative nature of ancient Hindu expositions.<sup>39</sup> We see that clearly in Yama’s discourse here. We saw that Yama’s answer to Nachiketa’s simple question ran to about 80 mantras. These 80 mantras actually consist of three iterations, each following a common framework. When Nachiketa asked him to teach him about the Atman, Yama began his **1<sup>st</sup> iteration** and told him that the Atman exists; Om is its symbol; then he explained the nature of the Atman; then he informed him that the Atman can be realized by Its own grace by a person whose mind is calm. Then Yama began his **2<sup>nd</sup> iteration** with the 2<sup>nd</sup> level model of the Two-birds. He informed Nachiketa that two entities exist within the human personality; using the chariot imagery, he explained how the mind can be made calm; then he explained the nature of the Atman using the Deha-dehin model, a 3<sup>rd</sup> level model, using all daily use ideas and concepts. Thereafter, Yama began his **3<sup>rd</sup> iteration** using another 3<sup>rd</sup> level model, the Ashwattha Tree model, to explain the nature of the Atman; now he will explain how to calm down the mind; then he will assert that the Atman exists; he utters a couple of mantras asserting the existence of the Atman; and then concludes his discourse with Nachiketa by explaining how death occurs. It is important to understand this scheme of iteration (along with the conversation mode) in ancient Hindu spiritual discourse. We see Sri Ramakrishna adopt this iterative discourse in his Gospel. Again & again, he puts forth the following few ideas, in various forms: 1) God exists; 2) God can be seen; 3) Pray to God for His vision; 4) Seeing God is the goal of human life. If we distill the large book ‘*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*’, we get these four ideas only, presented in kaleidoscopic combinations.

Yama explains the Yoga process by saying: *“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 realized 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.”*

Yama then once again asserts the existence of the Atman, which cannot be perceived by any ordinary means of perception: *“Atman cannot be attained by speech, by the mind, or by the eye. How can It be realized in any other way than by the affirmation of him who says: ‘He is’? He is to be realized first as Existence limited by upadhis and then in His true transcendental nature. Of these two aspects, Atman realized as Existence leads the knower to the realization of His true nature.”*

Then Yama concludes by explaining how death occurs: *“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—yea, as the Bright, as the Immortal.”*

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<sup>39</sup> Please see Pg#2 of this article.

The Upanishad concludes its teaching with a formal mantra: *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.*

We can now put together the mantras uttered by Yama and get a ready-reference according to their content. Nachiketa asked Yama about what happens after death. In other words, he wanted to know about the Atman. Yama begins by laying down before Nachiketa the absolutely essential requirements in a person before he embarks on unravelling the mystery of the Atman and death. Then we saw that when Yama was convinced that Nachiketa was quite qualified, he started to speak, in three iterations, to Nachiketa about four main things: 1): Asserting the existence of the Atman; 2): the nature of the Atman; 3): the means of perceiving the Atman (also known as the Yoga process); 4): how death occurs and what happens to a person who has perceived the Atman.

### **1<sup>st</sup> iteration:**

#### **Asserting the existence of the Atman (I.ii.15-17)**

I.ii.15: 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.

I.ii.16: This syllable Om is indeed Brahman. This syllable is the Highest. Whosoever knows this syllable obtains all that he desires.

I.ii.17: This is the best support; this is the highest support. Whosoever knows this support is adored in the world of Brahma.

### **1<sup>st</sup> iteration:**

#### **Nature of the Atman (I.ii.20 & 21)**

I.ii.20: 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 tranquility of the senses and the mind and becomes free from grief.

I.ii.21: 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?

### **1<sup>st</sup> iteration:**

#### **Means of perceiving the Atman (Yoga process) (I.ii.23-25)**

I.ii.23: 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.

I.ii.24: He who has not first turned away from wickedness, who is not tranquil and subdued and whose mind is not at peace, cannot attain Atman. It is realized only through the Knowledge of Reality.

I.ii.25: Who, then, knows where He is – He to whom Brahmins and Kshatriyas are mere food and death itself a condiment?

## **1<sup>st</sup> iteration:**

### **How death occurs & what happens to a person who has perceived the Atman (I.ii.18, 19 & 22)**

I.ii.18: 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.

I.ii.19: 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.

I.ii.22: The wise man, having realized Atman as dwelling within impermanent bodies but Itself bodiless, vast and all-pervading, does not grieve.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> iteration:**

### **Asserting the existence of the Atman**

I.iii.1: 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.

I.iii.2 : 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.

II.ii.12: 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.

II.ii.13: 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.

II.ii.14: The sages realize that indescribable Supreme Joy as “This is That.’ How can I realize It? Is It self-luminous? Does It shine brightly, or not?

## **2<sup>nd</sup> iteration:**

### **Nature of the Atman**

II.i.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.

II.i.2: Children pursue outer pleasures and fall into the net of widespread death; but calm souls, having known what unshakable Immortality is, do not covet any uncertain thing in this world.

II.i.3: It is through Atman that one knows form, taste, smell, sounds, touches and carnal pleasures. Is there anything that remains unknown to Atman? This, verily, is That.



II.i.4: It is through Atman that one perceives all objects in sleep or in the waking state. Having realized the vast, all-pervading Atman, the calm soul does not grieve.

II.i.5: 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, verily, is That.

II.i.6: He verily 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, verily, is That.

II.i.7: He verily 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, verily, is That.

II.i.8: 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, verily, is That.

II.i.9: 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, verily, is That.

II.i.12: 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, verily, is That.

II.i.13: 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, verily, is That.

II.ii.1: 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, verily, is That.

II.ii.2: 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.

II.ii.3: He it is who sends prana upward and who leads apana downward. All the devas worship that adorable One seated in the middle.

II.ii.4: 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, verily, is That?

II.ii.5: 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.

II.ii.9: 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.

II.ii.10: 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.

II.ii.11: 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.

II.ii.15: 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.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> iteration:**

### **Means of perceiving the Atman (Yoga process)**

I.iii.3: Know the atman to be the master of the chariot; the body, chariot; the intellect, the charioteer; and the mind, the reins.

I.iii.4: 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.

I.iii.5: 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.

I.iii.6: 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.

I.iii.7: 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.

I.iii.8: 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.

I.iii.9: 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.

I.iii.10-11: 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.

I.iii.13: 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.

I.iii.14: 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.

II.i.11: By the mind alone is Brahman to be realized; then one does not see in It any multiplicity whatsoever. He goes from death to death who sees multiplicity in It. This, verily, is That.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> iteration:**

### **How death occurs & what happens to a person who has perceived the Atman**

I.iii.15: Having realized Atman, which is soundless, intangible, formless, undecaying and likewise tasteless, eternal and odorless; having realized That which is without beginning and end, beyond the Great and unchanging – one is freed from the jaws of death.

I.iii.16: The wise man who has heard and related the eternal story of Nachiketa, told by Death, is adored in the world of Brahman.

I.iii.17: And he who, practicing self-control, recites the supreme secret in an assembly of Brahmins or at an after-death ceremony obtains thereby infinite rewards. Yea, he obtains infinite rewards.

II.i.10: 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.

II.i.14: 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 verily runs after them in all directions.

II.i.15: As pure water poured into pure water becomes one with it, so also, O Gautama, does the Self of the sage who knows.

II.ii.6: Well then, Gautama, I shall tell you about this profound and eternal Brahman and also about what happens to the atman after meeting death.

II.ii.7: 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.

II.ii.8: 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, verily, is That.

## **3<sup>rd</sup> iteration:**

### **Asserting the existence of the Atman**

II.iii.12: Atman cannot be attained by speech, by the mind, or by the eye. How can It be realized in any other way than by the affirmation of him who says: ‘He is’?

II.iii.13: He is to be realized 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 realization of His true nature.

## **3<sup>rd</sup> iteration:**

### **Nature of the Atman**

II.iii.1: This is that eternal Ashwattha 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, verily, is That.

II.iii.2: 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.

II.iii.3: 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.

II.iii.4: If a man is able to realize Brahman here, before the falling asunder of his body, then he is liberated; if not, he is embodied again in the created worlds.

II.iii.5: 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.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> iteration:**

#### **Means of perceiving the Atman (Yoga process)**

II.iii.6: 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.

II.iii.7: 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.

II.iii.8: Beyond the Unmanifest is the Person, all-pervading and imperceptible. Having realized Him, the embodied self becomes liberated and attains Immortality.

II.iii.9: 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.

II.iii.10: 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.

II.iii.11: 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.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> iteration:**

#### **How death occurs & what happens to a person who has perceived the Atman**

II.iii.14: When all the desires that dwell in the heart fall away, then the mortal becomes immortal and here attains Brahman.

II.iii.15: When all the ties of the heart are severed here on earth, then the mortal becomes immortal. This much alone is the teaching.

Equipped with this background knowledge, we can attempt the serious study of any Upanishad, and obtain a working knowledge of Vedanta.

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## Appendix

### Katha Upanishad

(Mantras categorized based on content)

#### Preparatory qualifications: (I.ii.1-13)

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. Yea, 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 becomes 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, realizes 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 realized 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.

### **Asserting the existence of the Atman**

**I.ii.15-17:** 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.

**I.iii.1-2:** 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.

**II.ii.12-13:** 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.

**II.ii.14; II.iii.12-13:** The sages realize that indescribable Supreme Joy as "This is That." How can I realize It? Is It self-luminous? Does It shine brightly, or not? Atman cannot be attained by speech, by the mind, or by the eye. How can It be realized in any other way than by the affirmation of him who says: "He is"? He is to be realized first as Existence limited by upadhis and then in His true transcendental nature. Of these two aspects, Atman realized as Existence leads the knower to the realization of His true nature.

### **Nature of the Atman**

**I.ii.20 & 21:** 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 tranquility 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?

**II.i.1-2:** 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 unshakable Immortality is, do not covet any uncertain thing in this world.

**II.i.3-9:** It is through Atman that one knows form, taste, smell, sounds, touches and carnal pleasures. Is there anything that remains unknown to Atman? This, verily, is That. It is through Atman that one perceives all objects in sleep or in the waking state. Having realized 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, verily, is That. He verily 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, verily, is That. He verily 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, verily, 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, verily, 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, verily, is That.

**II.i.12-13:** 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, verily, 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, verily, is That.

**II.ii.1-5:** 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, verily, 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, verily, 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.

**II.ii.9-10:** 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.

**II.ii.11, 15:** 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. 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.

**II.iii.1-2:** This is that eternal Ashwattha 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, verily, is That. Whatever there is – the whole universe – vibrates because it has gone forth from Brahman, which exists as its Ground.

**II.iii.2-3:** 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.

**II.iii.4-5:** If a man is able to realize 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.

### **Means of perceiving the Atman (Yoga process)**

**I.ii.23-25:** 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 realized 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?

**I.iii.3-9:** 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.

**I.iii.10-11:** 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.

**I.iii.13; II.iii.6-8:** 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. 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 realized Him, the embodied self becomes liberated and attains Immortality.

**I.iii.14; II.iii.11:** 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. 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.



**II.i.11; II.iii.9-10:** By the mind alone is Brahman to be realized; then one does not see in It any multiplicity whatsoever. He goes from death to death who sees multiplicity in It. This, verily, is That. 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.

### **How death occurs & what happens to a person who has perceived the Atman**

**I.ii.18-19:** 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.

**I.ii.22; I.iii.15:** The wise man, having realized Atman as dwelling within impermanent bodies but Itself bodiless, vast and all-pervading, does not grieve. Having realized Atman, which is soundless, intangible, formless, undecaying and likewise tasteless, eternal and odorless; having realized That which is without beginning and end, beyond the Great and unchanging – one is freed from the jaws of death.

**I.iii.16-17:** 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, practicing self-control, recites the supreme secret in an assembly of Brahmins or at an after-death ceremony obtains thereby infinite rewards. Yea, he obtains infinite rewards.

**II.i.10:** 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.

**II.i.14-15:** 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 verily 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.

**II.ii.6-8:** 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, verily, is That.

**II.iii.14-15:** 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.

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