



Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc.
4835 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1X 1G8

ब्रह्मविद्या **Brahma Vidya**

कठोपनिषत्
Katopanishad
Section 1
Volume 1

ॐ नमो भगवते वैवस्वताय मृत्यवे ।
ब्रह्मविद्याचार्याय नचिकेतसे च ॥

ॐ सह नावतु सह नौ भुनक्तु ।
सह वीर्यं करवावहै तेजस्यिनावधीतमस्तु मा विद्विषावहै ॥
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः

प्रथमा वल्ली

ॐ उशन् ह वै वाजश्रवसः सर्ववेदसं ददौ ।
तस्य ह नचिकेता नाम पुत्र आस ॥ 1 - 1

तै ह कुमारं सन्तं दक्षिणासु नीयमानासु ।
श्रद्धा आविवेश सो अमन्यत ॥ 1 - 2

Today we commence our readings on कठोपनिषत् (also known as काठक उपनिषत्) as presented by कठ महर्षि in यजुर-वेद .

Together with ईशावास्य उपनिषत् and केनोपनिषत् which we have already read, कठोपनिषत् is also traditionally considered to be one of the essential Upanishads to be studied in the pursuit of ब्रह्मविद्या.

This Upanishad starts with the story of an event which must have happened so long ago, that it was a legend even in the times of Rig Veda. It is known that this story appears with different details in all the four Vedas, which fact authenticates the extraordinary nature and the scriptural significance of the event involved.

In any case, the story of this event provides the context for this Upanishad. The story itself is a simple one. A young boy, probably no more than 12 years old, by name Nachiketa, goes to Lord Yama - the Lord of Death, and seeks from him आत्म ज्ञानं - ब्रह्म ज्ञानं - SELF Knowledge. Thus the Upanishad is a dialog between Nachiketa as the



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student, and Lord Yama as the teacher of ब्रह्मविद्या. After making sure that Nachiketa has the necessary qualifications for gaining this knowledge, Lord Yama teaches him ब्रह्मज्ञानं.

On gaining ब्रह्मज्ञानं from the teachings of Lord Yama, Nachiketa becomes the very embodiment of that knowledge, which means Nachiketa gains मोक्ष. The Upanishad concludes by saying that anyone can likewise gain मोक्ष, which means the teachings of Lord Yama constitute an Upanishad open to any qualified person who seeks ब्रह्मज्ञानं - who seeks मोक्ष.

This Upanishad has a total of 120 verses in six पल्लीs, meaning six sections. Sections 1, 2 and 3 are grouped under Chapter 1, and sections 4, 5 and 6 are grouped under Chapter 2. Lord यम 's discourse on ब्रह्मविद्या itself starts only in verse 44, which is in the middle of Section 2. The first 43 verses in the Upanishad serve only to establish the context, in which Nachiketa emerges as a boy of extraordinary character, mental discipline, and total commitment to knowledge and service at the highest level of maturity, which makes the context itself an inseparable part of the Upanishad.

Every Upanishad is unique in terms of context, scope of details, focus of attention and style of communication. Upanishad does not waste words. Upanishad is not telling us a story. Upanishad communicates knowledge, and we must understand that knowledge. We will try to understand this Upanishad as well as we can.

A lot of patience, time and effort is necessary on our part to orient our mental environment to the mood and pace of this Upanishad. Only then can we appreciate and try to grasp the essential content of every word of this Upanishad in its entirety.

With this introduction, let us now say नमस्कार् to Lord यम and Nachiketa in the traditional manner, and begin reading the Upanishad, as it is in कृष्ण यजुर वेद.

ॐ नमो भगवते वैवस्वताय मृत्यवे । ब्रह्म विद्याचार्याय नचिकेतसे च ॥

ॐ is मङ्गल वचनं - word of auspicious beginning. ॐ is शब्दरूप प्रत्यक्ष ब्रह्मन्.

As unfolded by the माण्डूक्य उपनिषत् (which we may read sometime in our continuing program) the sound ॐ has within it, the लक्षण of ब्रह्मन्, the reflection of ब्रह्मन्, so that contemplation on ओंकार शब्द - the sound of OM, reveals ब्रह्म ज्ञानं - knowledge of



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ब्रह्मन्. ॐ is not simply a word for ब्रह्मन्. The ओंकार शब्द - The sound of OM is a means for recognition of ब्रह्मन्.

On such recognition, OM is ब्रह्मन्. itself, OM is परमेश्वर itself, OM is ONESELF, the आत्मा, the SELF in every self.

Uttering the sound OM with भक्ति, श्रद्धा and an attitude of contemplation – ईश्वर ध्यानं, one spontaneously touches ब्रह्मन् through ब्रह्म ज्ञानं. One gains ब्रह्म संस्पर्शं that Sri Krishna talked about in ध्यान योग. Consequently, one spontaneously recognizes OM as परमेश्वर within oneself and also within everything else that exists in this creation. Thus one recognizes OM as ईशावास्यं इदं सर्वं - ॐ इति इदं सर्वं OM is all this, as we have seen in ईशावास्य उपनिषत् and तैत्तिरीय उपनिषत् respectively.

Such recognition of OM is Auspiciousness Itself - आनन्द स्वरूप ब्रह्मन्. Uttering the ओंकार शब्द - the sound of OM with such recognition of OM is मङ्गल वचनं. With that मङ्गल वचनं, we commence our Upanishad reading.

ॐ भगवते मृत्यवे नमः - नमस्कार् to भगवान् मृत्यु देवता meaning यम देवता – Lord मृत्यु, Lord यम - Lord of Death. Lord of Death is the very embodiment of knowledge on सत्यं and मिथ्या - that which is eternal and that which is transient, उत्पत्ति and विनाश - birth and death, and कर्मs and कर्मफलs - actions and results of actions of all beings. Lord मृत्यु is the Lord of Absolute Justice. नमस्कार् to that भगवान् मृत्यु - Lord यम.

ॐ भगवते, वैवस्वताय मृत्यवे नमः - नमस्कार् to भगवान् मृत्यु - Lord यम who is the son of विवस्वान्, the सूर्य देवता - Lord Sun.

ॐ भगवते वैवस्वताय मृत्यवे ब्रह्म विद्याचार्याय नमः - नमस्कार् to भगवान् मृत्यु - Lord यम, son of विवस्वान्, and also who is the teacher of ब्रह्म विद्या - आत्म ज्ञानं - Self Knowledge in this Upanishad.

ॐ नचिकेतसे च नमः - नमस्कार् to Nachiketa also, who is the शिष्य - the student seeking and receiving Self Knowledge from Lord यम as the teacher of ब्रह्म विद्या.



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Without नचिकेत there is no कठोपनिषत्. Nachiketa sought and received ब्रह्मविद्या from Lord यम, and having received that knowledge, he also realized That Knowledge by himself, in himself, and became the very embodiment of That Knowledge just as good as Lord यम Himself, thus opening up that possibility for every human being. Thus Nachiketa is a very important link in the perennial flow of ब्रह्मविद्या - the Upanishad knowledge in the world of human beings.

We do नमस्कार् to both गुरु and शिष्य - the teacher and the student. By so doing, we pay homage to the tradition of the perennial flow of ब्रह्मविद्या knowledge from generation to generation, and also, we create in ourselves a reverential attitude of भक्ति and श्रद्धा towards both the teacher and the teaching.

As usual, the Upanishad starts with a शान्ति पाठ् - Peace Invocation, chanted both by the teacher and the students together. The शान्ति पाठ् here is a familiar one.

ॐ

सह नावतु सह नौ भुनक्तु । सह वीर्यं करवावहै तेजस्यिनावधीतमस्तु मा विद्विषावहै ॥
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

We have already seen this शान्ति पाठ् in Kenopanishad. Briefly, recalling again:

ॐ is मङ्गल वचनं - bringing the mind and बुद्धि into God-consciousness, we pray together.

सह नौ अवतु - May the Lord protect us all together

सह नौ भुनक्तु - May the Lord bring nourishment of Upanishad knowledge to all of us.

सह वीर्यं करवावहै - May this study inspire us to greatness in action. Let us realize आत्मना विन्दते वीर्यं - that the source of all greatness is only परमेश्वर within oneself.

तेजस्यि नौ अधीतं अस्तु - May this study bring enlightenment to all of us. May this study enable us to recognize परमेश्वर in everything in this creation, and at the same time recognize everything in this creation in the same ONE परमेश्वर.

मा विद्विषावहै - O! Lord, By thy Grace, let us be totally free from any kind of द्वेष, so that we are fit for the pursuit of ब्रह्म विद्या - Upanishad Knowledge.

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः - This is a prayer for ॐ शान्तिः - Exalted Peace, conducive to Self discovery, gaining Self Knowledge. It is meant to induce a state of creative



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tranquility in the अन्तः करण, mind and बुद्धि, making it receptive to Upanishad Knowledge. Only then the mind and बुद्धि become capable of receiving, digesting, assimilating and getting nourished by the knowledge gained.

Such is the significance of this prayer. Now the Upanishad starts.

प्रथमा वल्ली

ॐ

उशन् ह वै वाजश्रवसः सर्व वेदसं ददौ । तस्य ह नचिकेता नाम पुत्र आस ॥ 1 - 1

The Upanishad opens with a simple statement of a well-known fact, referring to an old legend. The Upanishad says:

ह वै - It is well known. The words ह and वै are Vedic expressions indicating or recalling the fact of an event that happened long time ago. By so saying, the Upanishad authenticates the event, with respect to all that is going to be said about it in this Upanishad. Therefore ह वै - It is well known. What is well known?

वाजश्रवसः - The person known as वाजश्रवस, who is the son of वाजश्रव. वाजश्रवसः means son of वाजश्रव

वाज means food. श्रव means यशः - one who has gained fame. Therefore वाजश्रव means a person who became famous through अन्नदान - his charity in giving food to the needy. वाजश्रव is more a title than a given name.

वाजश्रवस 's father वाजश्रव was well-known by his charitable disposition in giving food to the needy. Therefore,

वाजश्रवसः - वाजश्रवस, son of the अन्नदान famous वाजश्रव, what about him? From the details given in the Vedas, we understand that वाजश्रवस performed a यज्ञ - an elaborate Vedic Havan ritual called विश्वजित् यज्ञ, involving the services of several highly qualified priests from all the four Vedas, and also the assistance of many qualified ब्रह्मणाs, by open invitation - who can and who are willing to participate in the ritual.

In this यज्ञ कर्म, the यजमान - the performer of the यज्ञ, is governed by very strict personal discipline and commitment to the proper performance of the ritual in all details.



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In particular, the performer of the ritual is required to give away all his possessions, generally meaning, all his wealth, as gifts to the priests and all the ब्रह्मणाs participating in the यज्ञ कर्म. Every such यज्ञ कर्म is a काम्य कर्म undertaken, desiring, seeking and expecting some कर्म फल. The कर्म फल that is sought by doing the विश्वजित् यज्ञ is to be able to enjoy all heavenly pleasures in one's present and future lives. Therefore the Upanishad says

उशन् - meaning इच्छन्, काम्यमानः सन् - prompted by काम - desiring, expecting and seeking heavenly enjoyments of various kinds in his present and all future lives,

वाजश्रवसः सर्ववेदसं ददौ - वाजश्रवस performed the विश्वजित् यज्ञ in which he gave away all his possessions, all his wealth as gifts. In those days, one's wealth was counted mainly in terms of the number of cows that one possessed. Therefore, वाजश्रवस gave away all his cows as दक्षिण, as gifts to the priests and the ब्रह्मणा s in appreciation of their services in the proper performance of the यज्ञ कर्म. Referring to this event, the Upanishad says:

उशन् ह वै वाजश्रवसः सर्ववेदसं ददौ - It is well known that, prompted by desire for heavenly enjoyments in this present and future lives, वाजश्रवस performed the विश्वजित् यज्ञ in which he gave away all his wealth - all his cows as gifts to the priests and the ब्रह्मणाs.

तस्य ह, नचिकेता नाम पुत्र आस -

ह - Again it is well known

तस्य (वाजश्रवसस्य) - for that वाजश्रवस

नचिकेता नाम पुत्र आस - there was a son by name Nachiketa. It is also well known that वाजश्रवस had a son, by name Nachiketa. By so saying, the Upanishad confirms the fact that Nachiketa is not a fictional character created for the purpose of this Upanishad. Nachiketa was indeed a person who really existed long time ago, as the son of वाजश्रवस and the grandson of the well-known अन्नदान famous वाजश्रव. Having thus authenticated the old legend, from now on, the Nachiketa story is being narrated in the language of the Upanishad, just as it happened.

The story thus far is this. वाजश्रवस was performing the विश्वजित् यज्ञ, prompted by desires for all heavenly enjoyments in his present and future lives. His son Nachiketa



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was intensely watching the progress of the यज्ञ कर्म. Then what happened? The Upanishad says

तँ ह कुमारं सन्तं दक्षिणासु नीयमानासु श्रद्धा आविवेश । सो अमन्यत ॥ 1 – 2

ह -Again, narrating the story exactly as it happened

दक्षिणासु नीयमानासु - when the दक्षिणाs, the gifts of cows meant for presentation to the officiating priests and the participating ब्राह्मणs in appreciation for their services, when those cows were being brought in and being led separately to the priests and the assembled ब्राह्मणs for distribution, just at that time, something important happened in the अन्तः करण - in the mind and बुद्धि of Nachiketa, and that is in the words of the Upanishad:

तँ कुमारं सन्तं श्रद्धा आविवेश - सः अमन्यत - श्रद्धा in the event of the यज्ञ कर्म, naturally and fully, entered into the son Nachiketa who was still a young boy. विवेश means entered. आविवेश means entered into oneself, from within oneself, fully and naturally, which means Nachiketa was filled with श्रद्धा in what was going on in the यज्ञ कर्म and he thought within himself as follows. That is the simple meaning, but there is much more to understand here.

तँ कुमारं सन्तं -The Upanishad refers to Nachiketa as a कुमार, which means a son young in age. Young means how young? The Upanishad does not give the age of Nachiketa precisely, but the word कुमार dictates his age. कुमार refers to a बाल, not a युव, which means the son is still in boyhood age and he has not yet matured into a young adult.

In Vedic terminology, कुमार refers to a son who is in the first stage of life following childhood. Traditionally, the childhood age extends up to age 4 or 5, when the son is formally introduced into अक्षराभ्यास - learning to read and write and recite simple prayers. After a few years of such education, at the age of 7 or 8, the son has now matured into a कुमार - a boy ready for उपनयनं - formal introduction into वेद अध्ययनं and daily Vedic rituals. After a few years of such Vedic education, by about age 10 or 12, the boy is usually sent to a गुरु कुल - a Teacher-student family for further Vedic and Vedantic education. Since Nachiketa is now in the कुमार stage of life, the Upanishad



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indicates his age as no more than 12 years old. In one of the commentaries on this Upanishad, Nachiketa is actually referred to as a 9 year old boy.

Even though Nachiketa was still a boy, his mental disposition at this moment of the story was far more spiritually advanced than what is normally indicated by his physical age. Therefore, about that कुमार Nachiketa, the Upanishad says:

तँ कुमारं सन्तं - Whenever the symbol for ॐ is indicated in the Upanishad, it is a reminder for the reader to uplift one's mind and बुद्धि into a mood of Total God-consciousness, if it is not already in that state of mental disposition. Only then one can properly understand and appreciate what the Upanishad communicates. It is not necessary to utter the ॐ कार शब्द while reading or reciting the Upanishad, but it is necessary to bring one's अन्तःकरण - mind and बुद्धि, into the mood of ईश्वर चिन्तनं - God-consciousness, to absorb the content of the Upanishadic message.

With reference to the context here, तँ कुमारं सन्तं, by indicating the ॐ कार शब्द in referring to Nachiketa, the Upanishad points out that Nachiketa's entire अन्तःकरण - mind and बुद्धि, at this moment is totally occupied by ईश्वर चिन्तनं - God-consciousness, because he is fully absorbed in witnessing a यज्ञ कर्म in progress. Every यज्ञ कर्म is a form of worship of परमेश्वर.

Just by being totally absorbed as a witness to the यज्ञ कर्म, Nachiketa is also an active participant in the worship of परमेश्वर. For Nachiketa, everything involved in the यज्ञ कर्म is परमेश्वर itself, just as the भगवत् गीता says:

ब्रह्मार्पणं ब्रह्म हविः ब्रह्माग्नौ ब्रह्मणा हुतं । ब्रह्मैव तेन गन्तव्यं ब्रह्म कर्म समाधिना ॥ (G4-24)

which means that his entire personality is now totally immersed in ईश्वर चिन्तनं - in God consciousness, in the form and name of यज्ञ कर्म, and all that it involves in terms of the details of the ritual, in terms of the वेद मन्त्रा s being recited in the ritual, and all that means for the proper and effective performance of the यज्ञ कर्म to serve the wishes of his father.

It is that state of mental disposition of Nachiketa which is indicated by the ॐ कार शब्द - the sound ॐ in तँ कुमारं. Because such a state of mental disposition is extraordinary for



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a boy of his age, the Upanishad adds the word सन्तं, meaning "even while still being a boy of tender age". Now, about the boy Nachiketa himself, the Upanishad says:

तँ कुमारं सन्तं, श्रद्धा आविवेश - Into that Nachiketa, श्रद्धा आविवेश - श्रद्धा entered from within himself, instantly, naturally and fully. What does that mean?

The word श्रद्धा cannot be, and need not be, translated. Generally, we all understand what श्रद्धा is. Sri Krishna gives a full discourse on श्रद्धा in the भगवत् गीता which we will see a little later. This particular verse in the गीता is relevant here.

सत्त्वानुरुपा सर्वस्य श्रद्धा भवति भारत ।

श्रद्धामयोऽयं पुरुषः यो यत् श्रद्धः स एव सः ॥

(G17-3)

For all people, the श्रद्धा is determined by सत्य अनुरुपा - the disposition of one's entire अन्तःकरण - mind and बुद्धि. Every individual person is a श्रद्धामयः - an embodiment of one's own श्रद्धा. One is exactly what one's own श्रद्धा is. When you see the श्रद्धा of a person, you are seeing the person.

In the context here, Nachiketa's श्रद्धा is आस्तिक्य बुद्धि, which totally accepts वेद मन्त्रs uttered in the यज्ञ कर्म as प्रमाण - as means for gaining ईश्वर ज्ञानं, as ब्रह्मणो मुखः - the very words of परमेश्वर, as ईश्वर आदेश - the very command of परमेश्वर to an ईश्वर भक्त to perform the यज्ञ कर्म properly.

Therefore, every वेद मन्त्र that Nachiketa hears in the performance of the यज्ञ कर्म is totally meaningful to him, in the sense of ईश्वर आदेश - the very command words of परमेश्वर. That means, if the यज्ञ कर्म is not done totally in accordance with the letter and spirit of the वेद मन्त्रs, the यज्ञ कर्म will not be fruitful, and his father will not be able to gain what he desires, seeks and expects from the यज्ञ कर्म.

Further, any यज्ञ कर्म improperly done, may even hurt the performer of the यज्ञ कर्म. Therefore, Nachiketa's present श्रद्धा arises directly from what he was seeing as happening at the यज्ञ कर्म, and his immediate concern for what is absolutely good for his father, in terms of the proper performance of the यज्ञ कर्म.



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In the very first मन्त्र, the Upanishad introduces Nachiketa simply as a person, as the son of his father. In the very next मन्त्र, the Upanishad introduces the same Nachiketa as a श्रद्धावान् - a person who is the very embodiment of his श्रद्धा, his आस्तिक्य बुद्धि - his unqualified faith in the words of the Vedas and the Upanishads, as the प्रमाण - as the surest means for gaining ब्रह्म ज्ञानं - the very source of all knowledge, prosperity, success and happiness in their entirety.

We may recall Sri Krishna's words here

श्रद्धावान् लभते ज्ञानं (G 4 -39) - the one who is the very embodiment of श्रद्धा in ब्रह्म ज्ञानं, does gain ब्रह्म ज्ञानं, that is certain.

Therefore, Nachiketa, by virtue of his श्रद्धा, is now bound to gain ब्रह्म ज्ञानं.

As we may recall, in our Introduction to Upanishads, we talked about साधन चतुष्टयं - the four-fold qualifications needed for a person to become fit for gaining ब्रह्म ज्ञानं. Here the word श्रद्धा stands for all the four fold qualifications.

As we progress in this Upanishad we will discover that Nachiketa has all these four-fold qualifications in full measure, and thus, he is absolutely ready for gaining ब्रह्म ज्ञानं. And that is why, what is going to happen to him in this Upanishad is happening to him; it is no accident.

At this moment, Nachiketa's श्रद्धा in ब्रह्म ज्ञानं manifests itself in the form of some spontaneous thoughts within himself. Therefore, the Upanishad says:

स : अमन्यत - Nachiketa thought within himself (as follows). What thoughts went through Nachiketa's mind at this moment, we will see next time.