



कठोपनिषत्
Katopanishad
Section 1
Volume 6

- येयं प्रेते विचिकित्सा मनुष्ये अस्तीत्येके नायमस्तीति चैके ।
एतत् विद्यां अनुशिष्टः त्वयाऽहं वराणां एषः वरस्तृतीयः ॥ 1 - 20
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वक्ता चास्य त्वाद्दक् अन्यो न लभ्यो नान्यो वरस्तुल्यः एतस्य कश्चित् ॥ 1 - 22

Having granted Nachiketa the first two of the three boons already promised to him, Lord यम says

तृतीयं वरं नचिकेतो वृणीष्य । इति -O! Nachiketa, ask for the third boon as you wish.

Nachiketa now asks for his third boon in this manner

- येयं प्रेते विचिकित्सा मनुष्ये अस्तीत्येके नायमस्तीति चैके ।
एतत् विद्यां अनुशिष्टः त्वयाऽहं वराणां एषः वरस्तृतीयः ॥ 1 - 20

Nachiketa says "When a person dies, there is this doubt. Some say "the person exists" and some others say " the person does not exist". The truth about this matter is what I want to know, being taught by you. This is the third boon that I seek".

Nachiketa wants to know whether there is any real entity called आत्मा that survives bodily death, the popular notion on this matter being divided.

Now let us understand the words in this verse.

येयं विचिकित्सा - या इयं विचिकित्सा - या here means, that which is common, and विचिकित्सा means doubt. Therefore

या इयं विचिकित्सा - सा मम विचिकित्सा च - This doubt which is very common among people is also my doubt. And the doubt is



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प्रेते मनुष्ये ,मनुष्ये मृते सति - when a person dies, - मनुष्य here stands for any living being. When any living being dies

अस्ति इति एके - some people say "It exists", which means

आत्मा अस्ति इति एके - when the body has fallen, some people say that an आत्मा (which is distinct from the body, which is other than the body, sense organs, mind and intellect, and which gets connected to a new body in one's next life) exists.

न अयं अस्ति इति च एके - and some other people say

अयं न अस्ति - such an आत्मा does not exist

Since a definite, well ascertained knowledge on this matter - knowledge about आत्मा - is not there, because one cannot verify it either by direct perception or by inference, therefore, one requires a प्रमाण - a श्रुति knowledge - Upanishad knowledge, as the only authoritative means for gaining such knowledge to clear this doubt.

Such श्रुति knowledge can only come from an appropriate enlightened आचार्य - teacher. You are indeed such a teacher to me, and I approach you as my आचार्य. I, as your शिष्य - as your disciple, seek that knowledge about आत्मा from you. I seek that knowledge from you because the Vedas declare that among the four पुरुषार्थs, मोक्ष is परम-पुरुषार्थ - the supreme goal of human existence, and that gaining मोक्ष means gaining आत्म ज्ञानं. Therefore,

एतत् विद्यां अनुशिष्टः त्वया अहं

त्वया अनुशिष्टः - being taught by you

अहं एतत् विद्यां - I would like to gain this आत्म विद्या - knowledge about आत्मा

आत्म ज्ञानं - knowledge about oneself

चराणां एषः वरः तृतीयः - Of the boons that you gave me, this आत्म विद्या - this knowledge about आत्मा, this आत्म ज्ञानं - Self Knowledge is the third boon which I seek from you.

एतत् विद्यां अनुशिष्टः त्वयाऽहं चराणां एषः वरस्तृतीयः ।

Thus Nachiketa seeks आत्म ज्ञानं as the third and the last boon from Lord यम.



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The request for आत्म ज्ञानं from Nachiketa to Lord यम in कठोपनिषत् is essentially identical with the request for श्रेयस् or मोक्ष from Arjuna to Lord Krishna in भगवत् गीता. We may recall the words of Arjuna in Chapter 2 of भगवत् गीता

यत् श्रेयः स्यात् निश्चितं ब्रूहि तन्मे शिष्यस्तेऽहं शाधि मां त्वां प्रपन्नं ॥ G 2- 7

The context of कठोपनिषत् is totally different from that of भगवत् गीता. The mental disposition of Nachiketa at the time he made his request to Lord यम, is again totally different from the mental disposition of Arjuna at the time he made his request to Lord Krishna. But the content of Nachiketa's request and that of Arjuna's request are totally identical, and so are the content of Lord यम 's discourse and the content of गीतोपदेश which followed the requests of Nachiketa and Arjuna respectively. Again,

येयं प्रेते विचिकित्सा मनुष्ये अस्तीत्येके नायमस्तीति चैके ।

एतत् विद्यां अनुशिष्टः त्वयाऽहं वराणां एषः वर स्तृतीयः ॥

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This verse, wherein Nachiketa seeks आत्मविद्या - knowledge about आत्मा for his third boon from Lord यम, marks the real beginning of this Upanishad, and Lord यम's subsequent discourse on आत्म विद्या (which is same as ब्रह्म विद्या), in response to Nachiketa's request constitutes the real content of this Upanishad.

But Lord यम commences His discourse on आत्म विद्या only after making sure that Nachiketa's mental disposition is mature enough to absorb the knowledge he seeks. And Lord यम's process of ascertaining the maturity of Nachiketa's mental disposition commences immediately in the next verse, and continues for the next several verses. Along with Nachiketa, we have to be patient until then, to finally listen to Lord यम's discourse on आत्म विद्या.

Before we go to the next verse, let us briefly reflect on the content of the three boons sought by Nachiketa from Lord यम. For the first boon, Nachiketa asked for peace and happiness for his father. For the second boon, he asked for अग्नि विज्ञानं - knowledge about a यज्ञ कर्म - Vedic ritual which leads one to स्वर्ग - heaven. These two boons together cover the essential content of the entire कर्मकाण्ड of the Vedas.

Between these two kinds of objective desires, namely the natural desire to make one's father happy, and the कर्म फल prompted desire to go to स्वर्ग लोक, including ब्रह्म लोक,



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are all the other kinds of human desires for which knowledge about a variety of means of accomplishment are obtainable from the कर्मकाण्ड of the Vedas. All present day knowledge gained through the arts, sciences, engineering, technology, research and development, etc. belongs to the never-ending, ever-growing कर्मकाण्ड of the Vedas. All such knowledge is objective knowledge, knowledge of means and ends, knowledge of Do s and Don't s, knowledge of कर्म and कर्म फल relating to transient realities, infinite in number, each depending on something else.

Nachiketa's third boon is for आत्म ज्ञानं - self knowledge, knowledge about the truth of one's own self - indeed every self, which is distinctly a different kind of knowledge, obtainable from Vedanta - the Upanishads. This knowledge is आत्म ज्ञानं - subjective knowledge. In this knowledge, there is no कर्म or कर्म फल involved. Only "seeing" is involved, seeing what is already there, recognizing what is already there, what always is and what will ever be with no change whatsoever. That is what is involved. It is the knowledge of the only one, ever existent, totally independent absolute reality from which alone arises every kind of objective knowledge of transient reality.

Thus all the three boons sought by Nachiketa together constitute the essential content of the entire Veda, including Vedanta, the totality of all knowledge –पूर्णज्ञानं, knowledge of both transient reality and absolute reality and their inseparable combination. Knowledge of इदं सर्वं and ईश्वर, knowledge of क्षेत्र and क्षेत्रज्ञ, प्रकृति and पुरुष as we have learnt from the ईशावास्य उपनिषत् and the भगवत् गीता.

Gaining that पूर्ण ज्ञानं - totality of knowledge is the means, the only means for gaining total fulfillment in life. The necessary pre-requirements for gaining that पूर्ण ज्ञानं are त्रिभिरेत्य सन्धिं and त्रिकर्मकृत् - proper upbringing in one's formative years of life and dedicated practice of यज्ञ, दान, तपस् कर्मा s with proper attitude throughout one's life as we saw last time.

That is the first message of what we have already seen so far in this Upanishad.

As we have seen, Lord यम granted the first two boons to Nachiketa with no hesitation whatsoever, but he does not do so with respect to the third boon. The reason for this arises from a consideration of अधिकारित्वं - which means one's natural and or cultivated fitness for the successful pursuit of any knowledge.



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The knowledge contained in the कर्मकाण्ड of the Vedas is so varied and infinite in scope that every person is an अधिकारि. Every person is qualified enough to pursue on his own choice, that part of the कर्मकाण्ड of the Vedas suited to one's own natural interests and ability. That is not the case with respect to the pursuit of Upanishadic knowledge, which is concerned only with आत्म ज्ञानं - Self Knowledge, for the successful pursuit of which an अधिकारि must have four definite pre-requirement qualifications. They are the साधन चतुष्टयं we talked about in our Introduction to Upanishads.

Lord यम wants to make sure that Nachiketa is indeed an अधिकारि for आत्म ज्ञानं, and that he has all the necessary pre-requirement qualifications to be fit for gaining आत्म ज्ञानं. Let us briefly recall those pre-requirements with reference to the context here. They are:

1. नित्य अनित्य वस्तु विवेकः - Ability to discriminate between नित्य वस्तु that which is eternal and अनित्य वस्तु that which is transient.

Even after gaining knowledge about the means of going to ब्रह्म लोक, the very fact that Nachiketa seeks आत्म ज्ञानं shows that Nachiketa does understand that ब्रह्म लोक is only an object of transient existence, and only आत्म ज्ञानं is eternal existence, which indicates that Nachiketa already has नित्य अनित्य वस्तु विवेक बुद्धि.

2. इह आमुत्र अर्थफल भोग विरागः - Total dispassion to the enjoyment of the fruits of one's own actions, here and hereafter. Nachiketa has already shown his interests in the enjoyments of heavenly life - स्वर्ग लोक through the second boon he sought. Whether or not he has total dispassion for all such enjoyments still needs to be ascertained by some means.
3. शमादि षट् संपीत्तः - One must be endowed with the six-fold virtues of शम, दम, उपरम, तितिक्षा, श्रद्धा and समाधान - control over one's mind, control over all levels of external physical expressions, strict observance of one's duties, happy endurance of whatever comes one's way, and at the same time, doing whatever needs to be done, श्रद्धा - absolute faith in the words of the teacher, in the words of the Vedas and the Upanishads, and absolute faith in oneself, and चित्त एकाग्रत - capacity of the mind to abide in the pursuit of knowledge without distractions.



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From the ease with which Nachiketa could grasp the अग्नि विज्ञानं from Lord यम, it is obvious that Nachiketa has the above attributes in full measure. Finally

4. मुमुक्षुत्वं - which is मोक्षः मे भूयात् इति इच्छा. One must have the overriding desire for gaining मोक्ष - gaining आत्म ज्ञानं. There is no surety that Nachiketa has this qualification. He may have many desires, of which one of them may be gaining आत्म ज्ञानं. Whether gaining आत्म ज्ञानं is the overriding desire for him still needs to be ascertained in some way.

That is why Lord यम has some hesitation to grant him his third boon immediately. Lord यम is going to test Nachiketa about his fitness for gaining आत्म ज्ञानं. How Lord यम does that, we will see in the next several verses.

The four-fold qualifications needed for being fit to gain आत्म ज्ञानं have been more explicitly pointed out by Sri Krishna as the 20 personal attributes one has to cultivate, namely अमानित्वं, अदम्भित्वं, etc. all the way up to अध्यात्म ज्ञान नित्यत्वं, तत्त्व ज्ञान अर्थ दर्शनं in Chapter 13 of भगवत् गीता (13 - 7 to 11) which we saw some time ago. With these pointers, we can, every one of us can test ourselves to ascertain our own fitness for gaining आत्म ज्ञानं, for gaining total fulfillment in life.

If we do so, we will find that most of us do not yet have all the necessary prerequisite qualifications needed for being fit to gain आत्म ज्ञानं, to gain मोक्ष - to gain total fulfillment in life. This finding is no reason either to be discouraged or to despair, but it is reason enough to continue to try. The process of endeavor for gaining maturity in आत्म ज्ञानं is a continuous one. This process of endeavour is sustained, strengthened and accelerated by श्रद्धा in आत्म ज्ञानं.

So long as one has unqualified श्रद्धा in आत्म ज्ञानं, one will continue to progress every day in one's endeavour, and one will certainly gain maturity in आत्म ज्ञानं some day, because Sri Krishna assures that श्रद्धायान् लभते ज्ञानं (G 4-39) The one who is the very embodiment of one's श्रद्धा in आत्म ज्ञानं, ultimately gains आत्म ज्ञानं, as we have already seen in the life of भृगु in Taittiriya Upanishad, and we will see again in the life of Nachiketa in this Upanishad.



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Now, how long will it take for one's श्रद्धा in आत्म ज्ञानं to mature into one ultimately gaining आत्म ज्ञानं ? That one cannot say, but Sri Krishna says:

बहूनां जन्मनां अन्ते ज्ञानवान् मां प्रपद्यते ।

वासुदेवः सर्वं इति स महात्मा सुदुर्लभः ॥

(G 7-19)

After passing through a series of life times in which one has acquired all the necessary pre-requirement qualifications, which means one has acquired the necessary mental maturity to commit oneself totally to the pursuit of ईश्वर ज्ञानं through श्रवणं, मननं, and निदिध्यासनं, the ज्ञानवान्, the श्रद्धावान् - the person endowed with the overriding श्रद्धा in आत्म ज्ञानं ultimately reaches ME, the परमेश्वर. By recognizing वासुदेवः सर्वं इति, वासुदेव परमेश्वर is indeed all ईशावास्यं इदं सर्वं पूर्णम् अदः पूर्णम् इदं which recognition is gaining ईश्वर ज्ञानं, आत्म ज्ञानं - total fulfillment in life.

Sri Krishna hastens to add "Such a person, such a श्रद्धावान्, such a महात्मा is difficult to find, which means finding such a person is not a common occurrence, because for most people it does take a very long time to cultivate the pre-required attributes to become fit for gaining आत्म ज्ञानं. No matter how long it takes for a person to gain आत्म ज्ञानं, it is still far better than never being able to gain आत्म ज्ञानं - total fulfillment in life.

The story of भृगु in Taittiriya Upanishad and that of Nachiketa in this Upanishad are not just stories for entertainment. They are stories only in the sense that the events happened a long, long time ago, but they are authoritative and outstanding illustrations of the very process by which a mortal being gains immortality.

This is the second message of what we are currently witnessing in this Upanishad. Keeping these two messages clearly in our minds, let us now proceed with the Upanishad verses. Following Nachiketa's request for आत्म ज्ञानं for his third boon, Lord यम commences to test the fitness of Nachiketa for gaining the knowledge that he seeks. First, Lord यम tries to distract Nachiketa's mind away from आत्म ज्ञानं, and then he offers many alternatives which are usually more attractive to less mature minds. Lord यम says:

देवैः अत्रापि विचिकित्सितं पुरा न हि सुविज्ञेयं अप्तुरेष धर्मः ।

अन्यं वर नचिकेतो वृणीष्व मा मा उपरोत्सीः अति मा सृजैनं ॥

1 - 21



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Seeing Nachiketa simply as a very young boy, Lord यम tells Nachiketa

"What you are asking is

देवैः अपि अत्र पुरा विचिकित्सितं

देवैः अपि even by the देवास like अग्नि, वायु, इन्द्र etc. even by such देवा s

अत्र - एतस्मिन् विषये in this matter

पुरा in olden times, long time ago

विचिकित्सितं - doubts were entertained

Even the देवास, the celestial beings entertained doubts on this matter in olden times.

न हि सुविज्ञेयं - It is not something easy to understand. आत्मा is not something that can be known easily by प्राकृत जनाः - by worldly people, by people who are committed to worldly matters involving कर्म and कर्म फल. Even though they may hear all about आत्मा, nothing happens to them inside. Why? Because

अणुः एष धर्मः

एषः धर्म - This धर्म known as आत्मा. धर्म is called अत्मा because

धार्यते अनेन इति धर्म - that by which everything is sustained is धर्म, and that indeed is आत्मा. Therefore,

एषः धर्मः अणुः - the आत्मा about which you are asking is

अणुः is so subtle that it has no forms, and hence not easy to understand. Therefore

नचिकेतः - O! Nachiketa

अन्यं चर वृणीष्व - Ask for some other boon. The आत्म विज्ञानं even when told, it cannot be understood by you. Then what is the use of it ? Do not fritter away the boon I gave you. Ask for a boon for which there is no doubt in its result. Please ask for a doubt-free boon.

मा मा उपरोत्सीः - Please do not repeatedly insist on this चर, because it is practically useless for you.

अति मा सृजेनं , मां (प्रति) अतिसृज एनं

अतिसृज - Give up, मां (प्रति) एनं (वरं) the चर - the boon demanded of me.



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On this matter about आत्मा, even the देवास in olden times had their doubts. Very subtle is this subject, and not easy to comprehend. Therefore, O! Nachiketa, choose some other boon. Do not insist on this boon. Please let me off this boon". So says Lord यम to Nachiketa.

Now Nachiketa responds by saying

देवैः अत्रापि विचिकित्सितं किल त्वं च मृत्यो यन्न सुज्ञेयं आत्थ ।
वक्ता चास्य त्वादृक् अन्यो न लभ्यो नान्यो वरस्तुल्यः एतस्य कश्चित् ॥

1 - 22

मृत्यो O! Lord मृत्यु, यम !

त्वं आत्थ - त्वं कथयसि -You say that

देवैः अपि अत्र विचिकित्सितं किल (पुरा) - Even the देवास had entertained doubts on this matter - the Truth about आत्मा, once upon a time. Again, you say

यत् (आत्मतत्त्वं) न सुज्ञेयं -The truth about आत्मा is not easily comprehended. That is why even the पण्डिताs among human beings, those who are well versed in the words of the Vedas have doubts on this matter. Some say "आत्मा exists" and some others say "आत्मा does not exist". All this only emphasizes the precious nature of this knowledge, and the need for an enlightened teacher to teach this knowledge.

वक्ता च त्वादृक् अन्यः न लभ्यः - Also, it is clear to me that

अस्य, अस्य आत्म ज्ञान धर्मस्य - For unfolding this knowledge of आत्मा,

अन्यः त्वादृक् (त्वत् तुल्यः) वक्ता - another enlightened teacher like you, equal to you

न लभ्यः - it is not possible to get

Even if I go about searching for one to teach this knowledge, there can be none like you, equal to you, who can teach this knowledge, because you are the Lord of Death itself. You being the Lord of Death, you know all about आत्मा, and it is best for me to gain this knowledge directly from you.

This वर for आत्म ज्ञानं that I am seeking from you is मोक्ष साधनं - the means for gaining मोक्ष, which is the highest पुरुषार्थ - the supreme goal of life for a human being. That being so, anything else for me to ask you is going to be of far less significance to me, because there is nothing higher than मोक्ष.



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न अन्यः वरः तुल्यः एतस्य कश्चित्

एतस्य कश्चित् अन्यः वरः - Any वर I may ask you other than this वर

न तुल्यः - cannot be equal to this, because every other वर can only be

अनित्यः - transient in nature. This is the only वर that is नित्यः, eternal in nature.

By fulfilling this वर for आत्मज्ञानं - Self Knowledge, if I gain this knowledge, by your teaching, everything else is gained as well. Gaining that knowledge,

जीवः मुक्तो भवति this individual जीव is liberated from all limitations. When that happens, no वर is then required. Therefore,

अन्यः वरः एतस्य तुल्यः नास्ति - Another वर equal to आत्म ज्ञानं does not exist. Similarly another teacher equal to you to teach this knowledge also does not exist. I therefore seek only आत्म ज्ञानं from you, and nothing else as my third and final वर."

So saying Nachiketa stands firm on his choice for the third वर. Now Lord यम speaks up again, which we will see next time.