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ब्रह्मविद्या **Brahma Vidya**

कठोपनिषत्
Katopanishad
Section 1
Volume 2

पीतोदकाः जग्धतृणाः दुग्धदोहाः निरिन्द्रियाः ।

pītodakāḥ jagdhatṛṇāḥ dugdhadohāḥ nī rindriyāḥ ।

अनन्दा नाम ते लोकाः तान् स गच्छति ता ददत् ॥ 1 - 3

anandā nāma te lokāḥ tān sa gacchati tā dadat ॥

स होवाच पितरं तत कस्मै मां दास्यसि इति ।

sa hovāca pitaraṁ tata kasmai mām dāsyasi iti ।

द्वितीयं तृतीयं तं होवाच मृत्यवे त्वा ददामि इति ॥ 1 - 4

dvitīyaṁ tṛtīyaṁ taṁ hovāca mṛtyave tvā dadāmi iti ॥

बहूनां एमि प्रथमो बहूनां एमि मध्यमः ।

bahūnām emi prathamō bahūnām emi madhyamaḥ ।

किं स्वित् यमस्य कर्तव्यं यन्मया अद्य करिष्यति ॥ 1 - 5

kiṁ svit yamasya kartavyaṁ yanmayā adya kariṣyati ॥

अनुपश्य यथा पूर्वे प्रतिपश्य तथाऽपरे ।

anupaśya yathā pūrve pratipaśya tathā'pare ।

सस्यमिव मर्त्यः पच्यते सस्यमिव अजायते पुनः ॥ 1 - 6

sasyamiva martyaḥ pacyate sasyamiva ajāyate punaḥ ॥

This is the story thus far. वाजश्रवस *vājaśravasa* was performing an elaborate Vedic Havan Ritual called विश्वजित् यज्ञ *viśvajit yajña*, seeking heavenly enjoyments in his present and future lives. His son Nachiketa, still a young boy, filled with great श्रद्धा *śraddhā* in the proper performance of the यज्ञ *yajña* and the consequent fulfillment of his father's wishes, was watching the proceedings of the यज्ञ *yajña* attentively. As his father was in the process of distributing cows to the priests and the assembled ब्राह्मणाः *brahmaṇās* as दक्षिणाः *dakṣiṇās* - as gifts in appreciation of their services, seeing the quality of those cows, Nachiketa thought within himself as follows:



Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc.
4835 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1X 1G6

ब्रह्मविद्या **Brahma Vidya**

स : अमन्यत *saḥ amanyata* -The Upanishad now tells what his thoughts were.

पीतोदकाः जग्धतृणाः दुग्धदोहाः निरिन्द्रियाः ।

pītodakāḥ jagdhatṛṇāḥ dugdhadohāḥ nirindriyāḥ ।

अनन्दा नाम ते लोकाः तान् स गच्छति ता ददत् ॥ 1 - 3

anandā nāma te lokāḥ tān sa gacchati tā dadat ॥

Directing his mind towards the different grades of cows being presented as दक्षिणाs *dakṣiṇās* - as gifts to the ब्राह्मणाs *brāhmaṇās*, Nachiketa sees some of these cows as

पीतोदकाः *pītodakāḥ* - पीत उदकाः *pīta udakāḥ* - उदकं *udakam* means water

पीतं *pītam* means, has been drunk already. Therefore,

पीतोदकाः *pītodakāḥ* means, these cows have already drunk their last drops of water, which means that these cows are so old that they cannot even drink water any more. Further, he sees some cows as

जग्धतृणाः *jagdhatṛṇāḥ* - तृण *ṭṛṇāḥ* - grass, जग्ध *jagdha* has been eaten. Therefore

जग्धतृणाः *jagdhatṛṇāḥ* means, these cows, may be, they can drink water, but they cannot eat grass, because they have no teeth. Again, he sees some other cows as

दुग्धदोहाः *dugdhadohāḥ* -दोह *doha* milk, दुग्ध *dugdha* has already been milked.

Therefore दुग्धदोहाः *dugdhadohāḥ* means that these cows whose milk has already been milked for the last time, which means, that these cows - maybe they can drink water and eat grass, but they can no longer yield any milk.

These ब्राह्मणाs *brāhmaṇās* are obliged to feed them, but they can get no milk from them, because these cows have passed the age of yielding milk. Again, he sees some other cows as

निरिन्द्रियाः *nirindriyāḥ* - These are cows which are devoid of the power of their organs, which means they are no longer capable of bearing calves.

In other words, all the cows that he is seeing are too old to be useful and they are unfit to be given as दक्षिणाs *dakṣiṇās* for the ब्राह्मणाs *brāhmaṇās*. Therefore Nachiketa thinks this way.

ददत् ताः *dadat tāḥ* - Giving these kinds of cows as दक्षिणाs *dakṣiṇās* for the ब्राह्मणाs *brāhmaṇās*

सः तान् गच्छति *saḥ tān gacchati* - he, the performer of the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma*, goes to those worlds



Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc.
4835 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1X 1G6

ब्रह्मविद्या Brahma Vidya

अनन्दा नाम ते लोकाः *anandā nāma te lokāḥ* - which are called the joyless worlds, totally devoid of all happiness.

"Giving cows which can no longer drink water, no longer eat grass, no longer give milk, no longer bear calves, giving such cows as दक्षिणाs *dakṣiṇās* as gifts for the ब्राह्मणाs *brāhmaṇās*, the performer of such a यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma* goes only to the joyless world of experiences, totally devoid of all happiness" so thinks Nachiketa.

Evidently, in Nachiketa's vision, his father was doing something wrong, something improper. His father was not fulfilling properly the requirements of the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma* which he had voluntarily undertaken. By the rules of this यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma*, he was required to give away all that he possessed. What he was actually giving away were only old and useless cows. Such giving is the path, not to the joyful world of heavenly experiences that he is seeking, but only to joyless world of hellish experiences.

Being so much committed in his mind to the letter and spirit of the वेद मन्त्रs *veda mantras*, associated with the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma* as ईश्वर आदेश *īśvara ādeśa* - as the very command words of परमेश्वर *parameśvar*, Nachiketa could not reconcile himself to the possibility of such a terrible fate for his father. Therefore, in order to make up for the perceived deficiency in the proper performance of his father's यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma*, Nachiketa takes this bold step. He goes to his father and says:

स होवाच पितरं तत कस्मै मां दास्यसि इति ।

sa hovāca pitaraṁ tata kasmai mām dāsyasi iti ।

द्वितीयं तृतीयं तँ होवाच मृत्यवे त्वा ददामि इति ॥

1 - 4

dvitīyaṁ tṛtīyaṁ taṁ hovāca mṛtyave tvā dadāmi iti ॥

Even while his father was busy in the rituals involved in giving away the cows to the ब्राह्मणाs *brāhmaṇās*, Nachiketa approached his father

सः पितरं उवाच ह *saḥ pitaraṁ uvāca ha* - he said to his father. Again, the word ह *ha* here indicates that the Upanishad's narration of the story here is just as it happened.

तत *tat* - meaning तात *tāt* Addressing his father as तात *tāt*, which is the affectionate and respectful way to address one's father.

तात *tāt*, कस्मै मां दास्यसि इति *kasmai mām dāsyasi iti* - to whom, to which ब्राह्मण *brāhmaṇ* will you give me as दक्षिण *dakṣiṇa*?



Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc.
4835 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1X 1G6

ब्रह्मविद्या **Brahma Vidya**

The father seemed to be too busy to pay any attention to his question. Therefore,

द्वितीयं तृतीयं ह उवाच *dvitīyaṃ tṛtīyaṃ ha uvāca* - To whom will you give me as दक्षिण *dakṣiṇa*? to whom will you give me as दक्षिण *dakṣiṇa*?" Thus he persisted in asking the same question again for the second time, and again for the third time.

The father lost his temper at what he considered to be an ill-mannered intrusion of his young son during the progress of the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma*, and he exploded thus in anger.

मृत्यवे त्वा (त्वां) ददामि इति *mṛtyave tvā (tvāṃ) dadāmi iti* - "Unto मृत्यु *mṛtyu* - Lord Death, Lord यम *yama* I give you"

तँ ह उवाच *taṃ ha uvāca* - तँ ह उवाच *taṃ ha uvāca* means, thus the father replied to Nachiketa. The ँकार *kāra* used for Nachiketa (तँ *taṃ*) indicates the God-conscious mental environment of Nachiketa, at the time his father uttered the words "मृत्यवे त्वा ददामि *mṛtyave tvā dadāmi* - I give you to Lord Yama". By so saying at the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma*, Nachiketa's father has already given away Nachiketa to Lord यम *yama*.

Even as he was doing that, Nachiketa's father found himself in a mood of anger and fear, anger over himself for momentarily losing control over himself, and fear of the possible consequences of his unintended action. But Nachiketa himself had no fear or anger. He was, as before, filled with श्रद्धा *śraddhā* in the proper performance of the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma*, as ईश्वर कर्म *īśvara karma*, ईश्वर आदेश *īśvara ādeśa* - as the very command of परमेश्वर *parameśvar*.

That is the significance of the ँकार शब्द *kāra śabda* (तँ ह उवाच *taṃ ha uvāca*) with reference to Nachiketa.

When Nachiketa asked his father "कस्मै मां दास्यसि *kaśmai māṃ dāsyasi* - to whom will you give me", Nachiketa seemed to remind his father that he was required to give away all his possessions, and that he, as his son, was also meant to be given away, and so he wanted to know to whom his father proposed to give him - which only revealed Nachiketa's innate virtue of श्रद्धा *śraddhā*. He had great love for the sanctity of वेद मन्त्र *veda mantras* - propriety in the performance of the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karmas* as ईश्वर कर्म *īśvara karma*. The father ignored the son's question initially,



Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc.
4835 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1X 1G6

ब्रह्मविद्या **Brahma Vidya**

but the son pressed home his question a second and a third time. Then the father momentarily lost his temper, at what he considered to be an improper intrusion of his son, and hence exploded in anger " मृत्यवे त्वा ददामि *mṛtyave tvā dadāmi* - Unto मृत्यु *mṛtyu*, unto Lord यम *yama* - Unto The Lord of Death I give you."

Hearing the angry words of his father, Nachiketa was not perturbed. He was ready to go anywhere and do anything in the interests of the proper performance of the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma*, for the absolute good of his father. Now, having already been given to Lord यम *yama*, Nachiketa was getting ready in his mind for his next step, and thought within himself as follows:

बहूनां एमि प्रथमो बहूनां एमि मध्यमः ।

bahūnām emi prathamō bahūnām emi madhyamaḥ ।

किं स्वित् यमस्य कर्तव्यं यन्मया अद्य करिष्यति ॥

1 - 5

kiṁ svit yamasya kartavyam yanmayā adya kariṣyati ॥

Having been told by his father "मृत्यवे त्वा ददामि *mṛtyave tvā dadāmi* - Unto Lord यम *yama* I give you", Nachiketa recognized that his father was upset by his behaviour. Therefore, he retired to a quiet place, away from his father, and began to think deeply about what was for him to do next.

He thinks as follows: "I will go to Lord यम *yama* and be of service to him as well as I can. What can a ब्राह्मण *brāhmaṇ* boy like me do for an exalted person like Lord यम *yama*? I don't know. I will regard him as my गुरु *guru*, and serve him as well as I can, as a शिष्य *śiṣya* - a disciple, just as I have been serving my father. That is all I know"

In Vedic culture, one regards the teacher just as one regards one's father. In one's service to the teacher or one's father, there are three levels of conduct. प्रथमः *prathamāḥ*, मध्यमः *madhyamaḥ* and अधमः *adhamāḥ* - the foremost, the middle and the lowest.

The foremost conduct is to be of service to the teacher by ascertaining his wishes at the proper time. The middle level conduct is to do exactly what one is asked to do, and the lowest level of conduct is to disobey the teacher. Nachiketa thinks this is how he will conduct himself, as a disciple for Lord यम *yama*.

बहूनां एमि प्रथमः *bahūnām emi prathamāḥ* - Among the many disciplines



Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc.
4835 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1X 1G6

ब्रह्मविद्या **Brahma Vidya**

एमि *emi* - I go

प्रथमः *prathamah* (सन् *san*) - being the first among them, which means, among his many disciples, I will be the first to be of service to him, and I will try to be the best in my service to him by ascertaining his wishes at the proper time. Occasionally, if I cannot be the best in my service to him,

बहूनां एमि मध्यमः *bahūnām emi madhyamah* - among the many disciples, I will at least try to be in the middle rank in my service, doing as well as I can, what I am asked to do.

But I will never be the अधमः *adhamah* - the worst in my service. I will never disobey Lord यम *yama*. I will try to be useful to him at all times.

But then, Nachiketa thinks further.

किं स्वित्, यमस्य कर्तव्यं, मया अद्य करिष्यति

kiṁ svit, yamasya kartavyam, mayā adya kariṣyati

किं यमस्य कर्तव्यं *kiṁ yamasya kartavyam* - What work of यम *yama* is there

यत् मया अद्य करिष्यति *yat mayā adya kariṣyati* - that which is going to be accomplished through me, today, meaning, through the action of my father in giving me to यम *yama* today. Therefore,

किं यमस्य कर्तव्यं, यत् मया अद्य करिष्यति *kiṁ yamasya kartavyam, yat mayā adya kariṣyati* - What work of यम *yama* is there which is going to be accomplished through me, by the action of my father in giving me to यम *yama* today? In other words, of what use am I going to be for यम *yama*? Obviously, Nachiketa thinks that no significant work of यम *yama* is going to be accomplished through his services, which means his own services to यम *yama*, however well done, is probably going to be insignificant.

Actually, it is not going to be insignificant, as Nachiketa seems to think. It is going to be Great and Auspicious, as the Upanishad words expressing the thoughts of Nachiketa at this time indicate. Let us reflect on the actual Upanishad words here.

किं स्वित्, यमस्य कर्तव्यं, यत् मया अद्य करिष्यति *kiṁ svit, yamasya kartavyam, yat mayā adya kariṣyati* - In the expression किं यमस्य कर्तव्यं *kiṁ yamasya kartavyam* - meaning "What work of यम *yama* " the Upanishad adds two attributes



Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc.
4835 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1X 1G6

ब्रह्मविद्या **Brahma Vidya**

to the word, किं *kiṁ* which means what? The Upanishad says किं स्वित् *kiṁ svit* - the word स्वित् *svit* simply accentuates the meaning of the word किं *kiṁ*. It makes the word किं *kiṁ* the most prominent in the expression. Therefore, किं स्वित् यमस्य कर्तव्यं *kiṁ svit yamasya kartavyam* means What a great work of यम *yama*!

As an additional attribute, *कार शब्द *in kāra śabd* is added to किं स्वित् *kiṁ svit*. Therefore

किं स्वित् यमस्य कर्तव्यं *kiṁ svit yamasya kartavyam* means, what a great work of यम *yama* - whatever that work is, It is a manifestation of the very grace of परमेश्वर *parameśvar*. Therefore

किं स्वित् यमस्य कर्तव्यं, यत् मया अद्य करिष्यति *kiṁ svit yamasya kartavyam yat mayā adya kariṣyati* means, what a great work of यम *yama* which is going to be accomplished through me, by the action of my father, in giving me to यम *yama* today. That great work of यम *yama*, whatever that is, is indeed the very grace of परमेश्वर *parameśvar*.

Such is the meaning of the divinely inspired thought of नचिकेता *naciketā*, by virtue of his श्रद्धा *śraddhā*. The work of यम *yama* that is going to be accomplished through Nachiketa, by the action of his father today, is indeed great and auspicious. What ultimately comes out of today's event is the perennial flow of ब्रह्म विद्या *brahma vidyā* in the form of कठोपनिषत् *kāthopaniṣat*, which is going to uplift countless generations of people for thousands of years to come, and Nachiketa is the all important link in this flow of ब्रह्म विद्या *brahma vidyā* knowledge. The very fact that we are reading कठोपनिषत् *kāthopaniṣat* today is a manifestation of the glory of this event in Nachiketa's life, and also the glory of this event in our own lives today.

Before we leave this verse, let us understand today's event properly. The perception of the young boy Nachiketa at a particular time in the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma* should not leave us with the impression that Nachiketa's father was miserly, that he kept the good cows for himself and gave only the old and useless cows to the ब्राह्मणों *brāhmaṇās* as gifts. Certainly, the Upanishad does not say so. On the other hand, even in the very opening verse, verse 1, the Upanishad said:



Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc.
4835 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1X 1G6

ब्रह्मविद्या **Brahma Vidya**

वाजश्रवसः सर्वं वेदसं ददौ वाजश्रवस *vājaśravasaḥ sarva vedasaṁ dadau vājaśravasa* – Nachiketa's father gave away all his possessions, all his wealth as gifts. Therefore, there is absolutely no justification to attribute any ill-motive to Nachiketa's father at the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma*. Consequently, the events that happened at the यज्ञ कर्म *yajña karma* leading to the statement "मृत्यवे त्वा ददामि *mṛtyave tvā dadāmi*" by Nachiketa's father, thus giving Nachiketa to Lord यम *yama*, is also a manifestation of the very grace of परमेश्वर *parameśvar* for the welfare of humanity. With this understanding, let us now proceed with the Upanishad.

As Nachiketa was thinking, as said in the last verse, Nachiketa's father was also thinking about what he said, and he sincerely repented his rash utterance spoken in a moment of anger. Of course he did not mean to give away his beloved young son to Lord Death. Since words spoken in a fit of anger need not have to be considered as commitments, he desired to withdraw those words.

There are Vedic rituals available for repentance and withdrawal of angry words. But Nachiketa did not want his father to withdraw his own words. He felt this way "Let my father's words not become false, even though I may not be of any significant use to Lord यम *yama*, let me at least make sure that my father's words can never be in vain" so was his thinking.

Thus Nachiketa had made up his mind to go to Lord यम *yama*, being truthful to the words of his father. But his father was not ready to let him go to Lord यम *yama*. In order to persuade his father to live up to his words and let him go to Lord यम *yama*, Nachiketa tells his father:

अनुपश्य यथा पूर्वं प्रतिपश्य तथाऽपरे ।

anupaśya yathā pūrve pratipaśya tathā'pare ।

सस्यमिव मर्त्यः पच्यते सस्यमिव अजायते पुनः ॥ 1 - 6

sasyamiva martyaḥ pacyate sasyamiva ajāyate punaḥ ॥

Addressing his father, Nachiketa says, Father

अनुपश्य यथा पूर्वं *anupaśya yathā pūrve*

अनुपश्य *anupaśya* means अनुक्रमेण आलोचय *anukrameṇa ālocaya*. Please think about this matter properly in proper sequence, in proper order, namely



Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc.
4835 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1X 1G6

ब्रह्मविद्या **Brahma Vidya**

पूर्वे *pūrve* - अतिक्रान्ताः पितृ पितामहादयः तव *atikraāntāḥ pitṛ pitāmahādayaḥ tava* - your forefathers gone before, your father, your grandfather, your great grandfather, etc.

Carefully recall in your mind every one of them about whom you have heard. Was there any one among them who said something and did not live up to those words? We come from such a family. Living up to the truth of one's word is our family code of conduct. Having said something, what is said is said. There can be no going back on what has been said, whatever might follow. That is our कुल धर्म *kula dharma* - family tradition. Therefore, it is both natural and proper for you to follow the foot steps of our by-gone forefathers. You stand to gain by such conduct in your own life. Further,

प्रतिपश्य तथा अपरे *pratipaśya tathā apare* - Likewise, observe and reflect on the lives of other respected people who are living now, around us, in our own society. In their lives also, there never was, and there never is, any falsification of one's own words.

In all these people, those who have gone by in our family, and also those who are respectable in our own present day society, well, in all of them, there is, and there never was, any falsification of one's own words. Falsifying one's own words is only for people who are not well-brought up in सनातन धर्म *sanātana dharma*. By falsifying one's own words, by telling lies, nobody becomes above old age and death. By being truthful at all times, at least one goes to heaven. Therefore, what is the use of falsifying one's own words? Again consider this fact.

सस्यं इव मर्त्यः पच्यते *sasyam iva martyaḥ pacyate*

सस्यं इव *sasyam iva* - Like corn (corn here stands for all plants grown from seeds)

मर्त्यः मरण योग्यः *martyaḥ maraṇa yogaḥ* - one is subject to death - a मनुष्य *manuṣya*, a human being, every human being

पच्यते, जीर्णः सन् म्रियते *pacyate, jirṇaḥ san mriyate* - gets old and finally dies like a corn plant. Similarly

सस्यं इव अजायते पुनः *sasyam iva ajāyate punaḥ*

सस्यं इव *sasyam iva* - like the corn plant

अजायते पुनः *ajāyate punaḥ* - he is born again

That being so, what does one gain in this transient world of human beings, by falsifying one's own words. It is better that I go to Lord यम *yama* upholding your words, thereby I will make your words true, even though they were told in a moment of anger. Please



Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc.
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protect yourself, Please uphold your commitment to truth at all times. Please never falsify your own words. Please let me go to Lord यम *yama*".

That is the content of Nachiketa's words to his father. Having heard the words of wisdom from his son, and on his own further reflection, Nachiketa's father finally decided to honour his own words. Accordingly, he sent his young son Nachiketa to Lord यम *yama*. Then what happened, we will see next time.