

## A Dialogue with Death: A Literary and Philosophical Glance of Kathopanishad

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### Abstract

Upanishad philosophy is considered as the Mount Everest among human thoughts. For India, Upanishads are the most beautiful flowers in its philosophical treasury. Many Indian and non-Indian intellectuals have bathed in the ocean of Upanishad philosophies. The Kathopanishad is one of the greatest among that treasure house of India. For every thinking human, death is as mysterious as life itself. Here, in Kathopanishad we see a dialogue with death. The great philosophy of life and death is revealed through this conversation. This is what the discussion topic of this article.

**Keywords:** Upanishad philosophy, Kathopanishad, Philosophy of life and death, Great student and teacher, Self-knowledge.

Kathopanishad is one among the major ten Upanishads (*Dasopanishads*) of India. This Upanishad is included in the last section of the *Krishna Yajurveda*. Two chapters are included in this Upanishad. Each chapter is divided into three sections; they are called *vallies*. *Uthishtatajagradaprapyavarannibodhata* is a famous hymn in Kathopanishad and which is popularized by Swami Vivekananda. He has quoted these hymns many occasions as a source of motivation to many.

Kathopanishad has great connection with Bhagavad Gita, because some hymns in Kathopanishad can be seen in the Bhagavad Gita as such in the Upanishad. Though Bhagavad Gita is the essence of Upanishad philosophy, but it has more close connection with Kathopanishad.

Central ideas of Kathopanishad is the form of a dialogue between Yamadharma (the death God) and Nachiketas, a boy. An important and famous Upanishad in ten principal Upanishads, Kathopanishad has influenced many intellectual scholars and writers world over. The Nobel laureate Irish poet W.B Yeats has dedicated many of his essays and other writings to themes in Kathopanishad. The American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson is another intellect

who was motivated by it highly. He has written many poems and essays paralleling the themes of it, a best example is his poem *Brahma*.

### **Nachiketa: The Ideal student**

Nachiketa is the central character in Kathopanishad. His conversation with Yama Dharma (death God) is the topic of discussion in this Upanishad. Nachiketa is described by Swami Vivekananda as the best example of an ideal student.

Nachiketa is the son of Vacharavasa. One day this Vachasravasa was starting for a sacrifice. He was about to give his cattle to the people who gathered there. Nachiketa observed that some cattles are very old and weak. Seeing this he inquired his father how could he gain any religious benefit by offering cows they are too old to give milk. To get 9 clear answers, Nachiketa repeatedly asked the same question again and again. Further he asked to his father: "If you offer your possessions to gain spiritual benefits, whom would you offer me to ? Annoying by this repeated questions of Nachiketa, Vajasvarasa told Nachiketa that he would offer him to Yama Dharma, the king of death. As a result of this, Nachiketa decides to meet king Yama.

Nachiketa reaches king Yama's abode and where he gets to know he has to wait Yama for three days as he was not there. Thus he waits for Yama for three days and Yama returns back. Yama becomes ready to give Nachiketa three boons because of his hospitality and concern.

Nachiketa asks his first boon that his father's anger must be pacified. Further, Nachiketa asks that his father should start loving him the way he used to do before. As the second boon, Nachiketa asks Yama to teach him the fire sacrifice that would take him to heaven. After fulfilling the second boon, Nachiketa asks the third and last boon. Here, he wants Yama to clarify his doubt about death. What will happen after one's death? This is what the great doubt of Nachiketa wants to clarify from Yama.

Here, king Yama tries to discourage Nachiketa for asking this question because it is doubtful even for Gods and very difficult to understand the answer. As a boy Nachiketa is considered by Yama not much mature to understand the answer of this doubt. Thus, Yama discourages him to ask this boon and requested to ask some other boon. But, as an unflinching seeker Nachiketa was not ready to get back from his question and he compelled Yama to give him answer to this question. He believes that Yama is the best teacher to teach the answer of this great doubt. On compulsion Yama becomes ready to answer the question. Here starts the great philosophical dialogues between death and Nachiketa. This is the background of Kathopanishad. Nachiketa here shows his quality of a good student and seeker. Swami

Vivekananda has mentioned Nachiketastudentship many times in his writings and speeches. He called Kathopanishad as the "most beautiful of all the Upanishads".

### **Sreyas and Preyas**

Yamadharma started his dialogues with Nachiketa. He started to make a pondering over the senses of human being and their limitations to acquire satisfaction. Here he makes a conversation over a two-fold path available to mankind, namely *preyas* and *sreyas*. *Preyas* is the path of worldly enjoyment and it is also known as the *pravrithimarga*. It is very easy to get hooked to this path for seeking material gains and they are no doubt, pleasurable. But, our senses of discrimination will tell us that these gains are not only fleeting and unsubstantial, but also pull one into the cycle of birth. Senses are giving just a passing pleasure. They are incapable of bringing eternal bliss. They are just coming and passing.

The second path is the path of realization of *nivrithimarga*. Here the focus is shifted to the welfare of the *atma* not the body. Realization is reached through renunciation and Nachiketasymbolizes discrimination that chooses *sreyas* – that which is good and the right. He rejects *preyas*, even though they are pleasurable.

Yamadharma says: "The good and the pleasant come to a man and the thoughtful mind turns around then and distinguishes. The wise choose out the good from the pleasant, but the dull soul chooses the pleasant, rather than the getting of his good and its havings".

*Preyas* also gradually leads to *sreyas* when one leads to mentally renounce its attraction. The result of this choice inspires one to practice moral values and that bring about the purification of the intellect or *chitrashudhi*. Kathopanishad says that the ultimate aim, that is the realization of the *Brahman* is attained only through this purity. Here in Kathopanishad conversation Yamadharma teaches Nachiketathe two fold path of *sreyas* and *preyas*.

### **Radha Kalpara or Chariot Analogy:**

*Radha Kalpana* or chariot analogy is a beautiful metaphorical description include in Kathopanishad to describe the mutual relationship among senses, mind, intellect and the self (atman). It is poetical picturization human life too. An interpretation of this chariot analogy can make a deep insight of the human life in this world and by these Upanishad philosophies can more be explained.

Horses in thischariot, charioteer, reign etc are great symbols in this beautiful Kathopanishad analogy of *Radhakalpana*. The body is equated to a chariot where the horses are senses. Comparison of senses with that powerful running animal, horses, is notable here. They are highly powerful animals and they are able to run very fast. By equating senses with horses it is very clear that the nature of our senses and its wandering and running nature. If

there is no control over them, they may dumb the traveller into any pit. So, a powerful rein is necessary to control them. Mind is considered as the reign over sense horses. Mind is the next immediate controller of the senses. But, that rein is incapable to control the horses unless it is under the control of an intelligent driver, because the rein hold by the driver. That is , Metaphorically it advises us to have control and lead horses by the unflinching wisdom and power of the driver driver through rein. The passenger of the chariot is *atman* (self). Through this metaphorical picture of the chariot it is explained that *atman* (self) is the passenger in the body and it is separate from the physical body. This chariot analogy gives one deep insight of human body and the soul in it. And, it clearly advices everyone to lead the chariot into the right path by holding full control over it.

Self knowledge is, as every Upanishad preaches , the ultimate aim of human life. That is , knowing the self or *atman*. The Chariot analogy concludes by describing control of the chariot and the contemplation on the self as ways by which the intellect acquires self knowledge.

Verse 1.3.10-11 of the Kathopanishadsays: He who has the understanding of the driver of the chariot and controls the rein of his mind, he reaches the end of the journey , that supreme abode of the all pervading.

Adi Sankaracharya makes his commentary about this : Here a chariot is is imagined for the atman , conditioned in *samsara* (a Sanskrit word , simply means ‘world’ or cycle of death and rebirth ) entitled to acquire knowledge and perform karma for attaining emancipation and for traveling in *samsara* , as a means to reach both. Know the *atman*, which is the enjoyer of the fruits of karma and is the bondage of *samsara*, to be the lord of the chariot. Know the body to be verily the chariot, because like a chariot the body is drawn by the senses occupying the place of horses. Know also the intelligence to be the driver, furnished with the capacity for determination, because the body is mainly guided by the driver; for, everything done by the body is generally done by the intelligence. Know the mind with its characteristics of volition, doubt, etc, to be the reins ; for, the senses , such as the ear , perform their function when grasped by the mind as horses by the reins “. (*The katha and Prasna Upanishad ard Sri Sankara’s Commentary*).

The chariot imagery teaches great life lessons to us. Everyone must try to become a master of the chariot. The ‘driver’ of the chariot must be intelligent and well balanced. If the driver of the chariot is unable for controlling the chariot , his/ her mind is ever impure, the goal is never reached and the chariot is hurled down. A person without self – control enters the womb of *samsara*.

### **Self Knowledge: The Ultimate Aim**

Kathopanishad asserts that self knowledge or *atmajnana* is the ultimate aim of human beings. By which one becomes liberated. Human body is a mortal thing. It has a beginning and end, it has all changes by the passing of time. But, *atman* does not born or die. It is eternal. Yamadharmas asserts Nachiketas that man need not fear anyone or anything, not even death because the true essence of man is atman. *Atma* is neither born nor dies, it is eternal and it is *brahman*. Three verses in Kathopanishad say about this philosophy. The same can see in Bhagavad Gita also, a direct reference.

"The seer (*atman* or self )is not born, nor he die. He does not originate from anybody , nor does he become anybody. Eternal, ancient one , he remains eternal , he is not killed, even though the body is killed".

"If the killed thinks that he kills, if the killed thinks that he is killed, they do not understand ;for this one does not kill , nor is that one killed".

" The self (*atman*) , smaller than small , greater than great , is hidden in the heart of each creature, free from avarice, free from grief, peaceful and content, he sees the supreme glory of atman ".

( Kathopanishadshlokas 18- 20, in 2<sup>nd</sup> section of 1<sup>st</sup> chapter )

So, this self knowledge or self realization or *atmajnana* is the ultimate aim any human can attain. By this one becomes immortal, that is, one becomes *amrutha* . That means one overcomes mortality. But, Kathopanishad says that, this self knowledge can't be attained by instructions, can't by arguments and reasoning from scriptures. It is not attained by those who do not abstain from misunderstood, not those who are restless nor composed, not those whose mind is not calm and tranquil ; It is attained to those who live ethically , internally peaceful and search within and examine their own true nature. That is, it is attained by oneself through meditation and introspection. As one of the corner stone's of the whole vedicphilosophy , meditation is considered as the path of introspection and self realization.

### **Arise Awake; having reach of the great , Learn**

This is one of the most famous *mantra* parts in Kathopanishad. Swami Vivekananda popularized this hymn by quoting various occasions with slight modifications, but without losing its essence. He quoted: "Arise awake and stop not, till the goal is reached ".

This hymn comes in the 3<sup>rd</sup> section of first chapter of Kathopanishad:

“*Uttishtatajagrataprapyavarannibodantill*

*Kshurasyadharanisiladuratayadurgampathastatkavayovadantill* “

Meaning : "Arise , awake and learn by approaching the excellent ones. The wise ones describe that path to be as impassable as a razor's edge which when sharpened, is difficult to tread on "

That is, Kathopanishad emphasis the need of spiritual guidance from an experienced master. Kathopanishad says that, one's true self is not this body , this mortal thing which is subject to decay , but *atman* that is what one's true self. It is soundless , touchless , formless, scentless, tasteless , without a beginning , without end and imperishable. One who reverses one's own self, one is liberated. It is self realization. That self realization is not easy according to Kathopanishad. That realization path is like travelling over razor's edge. But ,the Upanishad encourages one to go on that path.It advices to seek the guidance of a spiritual teacher.

This verse of Kathopanishad has inspired the British writer Somarset Maugham's 1944 novel *The Razor's Edge*. In Kathopanishad *kshurasyadhara* means "razor's edge". The title of the novel and the epigraph of this novel are inspirations from Kathopanishad. The epigraph of this novel is : "The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over ; thus the wise say the path of salvation is hard. In short, the call of Kathopanishad to the whole mankind is to tread ultimate goal, no matter how difficult the path is.

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