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A Book of Saadhana

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Narayanashrama Tapovanam
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Kaṭhōpaniṣad – A Book of Sādhana

Swami Nirvisheshananda Tirtha

[Talk on Kaṭhōpaniṣad delivered at the 3rd Sreemad Bhaagavata Tattva Sameeksha Satram on 26th December 2004 in Thrissur, Kerala]

Harīh OM Tat Sat. Jai Guru. We shall start with the Śānti Pāṭha. That will set the fundamental tone for today's discussion, because the Śānti Pāṭha of Kaṭhōpaniṣad has got some very significant elements. I would like all of you to repeat line after line as I chant.

*om saha nāvavatu | saha nau bhunaktu | saha vīryam
karavāvahai | tejasvinā vadhiṭamastu mā vidviṣāvahai
|| om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ ||*

Purity of Mind – The Goal

Kaṭhōpaniṣad is one of the most brilliant Upanishads where sādhanā is emphasized right from the beginning to the end. We may think of Vedānta as a philosophy but Kaṭhōpaniṣad is very emphatic in pointing out time and again that it is not a philosophy; it is to be practised and actualized in our life. The philosophy is rather secondary. The primary purpose of the

Upanishad is sādhana, the finale of which is the purity of the mind, *śuddhacittataa*.

Purity of mind is the goal of all the Upanishads, but Kaṭhopanishad specializes in focusing and illustrating it through a story. Time and again, through each śloka, it goes on hammering into our brain: “O seekers, you should not miss the goal. It is not *paṇḍitya* (erudition), it is not philosophy, it is purity of your mind that has to be cared for, that has to be attended to. You have to purify your mind; otherwise all your learning, all your *tapasyaa*, *brahmacarya* and what not, will become futile.”

Greatness of Guru-śishya Parampara

In the Śaanti Paaṭha itself, we find this emphasis. One speciality of this Śaanti Paaṭha is the use of *dvivacana* (dual number) – *Saha nau avatu, saha nau bhunaktu* ... etc. Why suddenly *dvivacana*? Who are the two persons? We know that it is referring to the teacher and the student. “Let both of us, the teacher and the student, be protected and nourished.” All our Vedic invocations generally address in plural: “*A no bhadraḥ kratavo yantu viśvataḥ*”, “*Sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ*”. Everywhere we are praying for the whole world, not even our country alone. Why then

has Kaṭhopanishad been so constricted, restricting its benedictory invocation to only those who are studying the Upanishad?

We have to be deep in our understanding. Our Upanishads cannot be constricted. Upanishads' sole aim is to make us universal. How can the invocatory mantra itself be constricted? When we think we find a great significance. A very special importance is given to the teacher and the student – not as just two persons, but as representing the Guru-śiṣya paramparaa (the lineage of teachers and students) through which Brahmavidyaa has lived in our society generation after generation, from time immemorial.

Because, the **real Knowledge of Truth remains ablaze in the Knower who lives it, who has identified himself with it. The book is only like a picture of the real fire.** Can we use the fire from the picture to cook our food, to burn dead bodies or to get warmth? The Knowers are the embodiment of the Upanishadic knowledge. Like a lamp lit by the flame of a burning lamp, the knowledge gets kindled in the śiṣya from the Guru. The śiṣya becomes a Guru and passes on the fire to the next generation. That is how the flame of Brahmavidyaa lives through eternity. Without the Guru-śiṣya paramparaa, this knowledge would not

have been available today. So, truly it is a prayer for the perpetuation of Brahmanidya for the highest benefit of the world; and not a constricted prayer for ourselves. There lies the greatness of the prayer.

The Śaanti Mantra also says: *nau adheetam tejasvi astu* – let whatever we learn become *tejasvi*. It should not become an intellectual knowledge, a bookish knowledge. **When we live the knowledge, it becomes *tejasvi*.** Then it says: *Mā vidviṣāvahai* – let us not be intolerant of each other. People may ask immediately: Where is the question of any intolerance or hatred between the Guru and the śiṣya? The Guru is always merciful towards the śiṣya and the śiṣya is always devoted to the Guru!

But, any real sādha will know that there is enough scope for intolerance because it is not like the knowledge given in an academic institution. This knowledge calls for complete transformation of our being, purification of our mind. **Our ego, at each step will hinder this purificatory process.** The Guru has to point out where we need purification, where we need correction. And the ego will come up each time and say, “My Guru has not understood me, he is devaluing me. Again and again he is criticizing me for no fault of

mine.” All these problems will come! So, for a sādḥaka living in Guru-sannidhi, this prayer is very important.

The real Knowledge is carried by the Knower. The book is only secondary. That is why the Kaṭhōpaniṣad exhorts: “*Uttiṣṭhata, jāgrata, prāpya varān nibodhata*” – Arise, awake, seek the best of the Acharyas; remain with him and try to actualize the Truth till the last bit of doubt is removed. *Nibodhata – niṣkarṣeṇa bodhata* – perceive the essence deeply and well **until you become doubt-free.**

Why? Because: “*kṣurasya dhārā, niśitā duratyayā, durgam pathastat, kavayoḥ vadanti*” – The path to this final auspicious goal of life is like the razor’s edge – it is difficult to cross, nay even difficult to tread on – the Kavis say.” Who are the *Kavis*? The *Kavis* are the Wise ones who have realized the Truth, who know how to get rid of the bondage of the world. They know the obstacles, pitfalls and allurements that hinder our journey on this path. So, at each step you need the guidance of the Wise Guru who will carefully, compassionately, lovingly, take you forward, take you across. First awake and arise to this need. Don’t be egoistic. Go to the Wise Guru and surrender. He will take you to the ultimate goal provided you have the **readiness and humility** to follow him.

Dawning of True Seeking

Here comes the sādhana. Our spirituality starts from maybe listening to some lectures, reading some scriptures or chanting some ślokas. We go to various Acharyas, listen to various speakers. Whatever we like we accept; whatever we don't like we reject. Although we are listening to the Mahatmas, the judgement in accepting or rejecting their words is made by our own intelligence. Does it not mean that we are giving our own intelligence the superior position than the Wise ones? As long as this phase continues, we are not wholesome seekers.

But, finally one day, we start feeling helpless that our intelligence is not able to find the Truth. The scriptures speak in so many contradictory statements, there are so many ways, so many pursuits; what am I to follow? How can I know what is the right path? That is the time – if we have śraddhaa in the words of our Mahatmas and the śaastras, then – we remember that they speak about Guru or Acharya. They ask us to go to the Wise Acharya and enquire humbly. “*Tad-viddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā*” – the Bhagavadgeeta says. Humbly, because otherwise our ego will again take up the supreme position. We may go to an Acharya, prostrate before him, ask him certain

questions but again we will judge his reply with our own intelligence.

Giving Guru the Supreme Position

What does humility mean? Humility means, I accept that the *Vara*, the realized Acharya, **knows about me better than what I know about myself**. He can tell me what I am supposed to do as *sādhana*, where lie my impurities and insufficiencies, where do I need corrections and improvements, and which way lies my auspicious growth. Unless the Guru is given this superior position, we will not be able to walk confidently on this path.

Suppose we are walking in a desert and are thirsty. We don't know where lies water. Nobody is there to tell us where we can find some water. Suddenly we find another person coming from the other direction and he looks quite satisfied and happy – not suffering from thirst. Then, will we not naturally think: “Being in the same desert he does not seem to be suffering from thirst! What is the mystery?” Should we not ask him: “Wherefrom did you get water?”

Like that, in the desert of our *samsaara*, we always see around us long faces, depressed faces. If we ever see anybody, who looks cheerful, peaceful and unaffected

even in grave crisis, then should we not go and enquire, **where lies the key to his internal strength and happiness?** Even when surrounded by death and calamity, that person does not seem to be affected by the world at all. When we are haunted by greed and competition, that person doesn't seem to be attracted by the lucrative things of the world!

The person in the desert may assure us: "Yes, there is water! I cannot show you from here, but if you walk along this path you will see a palm tree standing far away. Go near the tree and look down – you will find a beautiful pond there. Go and quench your thirst. It is sweet water, I have drunk from there."

Wherefrom will we have faith in his words? The first judgement has to be made by us: this man does not look thirsty; he must have got water. Once we have faith that this man seems to have got water, we have to follow his words. After going half the distance, cross-thoughts should not disturb us: "Oh, may be that person is misleading me; there is no water there. I will become all the more tired walking this way. Let me rather go my own way."

We have to seek the *Vara* with our own knowledge and discrimination. But once we have found the *Vara*, we have to trust his words, his guidance, until we reach

the palm tree and look down and see the pond ourselves. We have to see the pond. The Guru cannot see the pond for us. He can show us the way. We have to walk following his direction. There lies humility.

Uniqueness of Brahnavidyaa

There is a fundamental difference between Brahnavidyaa or Upanishadic knowledge and all other subjects. Because, all other subjects deal with the objective field while Brahnavidyaa is the knowledge about our own Subject – the ‘I’ in us. No purity of the mind or sublimation of the being is required for mastering any other subject. A great scientist or an economist need not be a very pure hearted person. He might be haunted by so many desires of the world. That will not hinder him from achieving mastery in his field. But, in spirituality it is not so. **Our scriptures do not talk about jñāana only as a philosophy.** Otherwise, all the teachers who teach Vedānta in the University would have been Knowers or Gurus. Our scriptures do not accept the theoretical knowledge of Vedānta as ‘Knowledge’. We have to do the sādhanā ourselves with our own mind and intelligence and match our experience with the knowledge revealed in the scriptures.

The Spiritual Laboratory - Discovering the Subjective truths

Before my talk, Nigamananda Swamiji introduced me saying that I was a scientist in my *poorvaśrama*. I was a physicist and at the same time, I had keen interest in spirituality – perhaps right from birth. I had been studying the scriptures right from childhood. I used to form my own concept about the Truth and its pursuit, according to my knowledge of science and knowledge of scriptural texts. Finally, when the depth and urgency grew, I found that I was not able to go beyond some contradictions. It was not possible to resolve the contradictions with my own understanding.

That was the time I thought of Baba. I had heard about him from our Poojya Swamiji, Swami Bhoomananda Tirthaji Maharaj. I went to Baba and expressed what I understood about spiritual sādhana and the ultimate Truth. I even had the audacity to explain the Truth and the sādhana according to two models, confessing that I did not know which model was to be followed. “Baba, I cannot think any more. You have to tell me what I am supposed to do,” I submitted.

Baba patiently listened to all that I said. He kept quiet for some time and then said, “My dear son, in your study of Physics, you might have learnt the theories

from the books and teachers, you might have learnt various laws and models, but until you did the experiments yourself in the laboratory, did you have a consolidated knowledge of what the theories meant?

“What you have learnt so far from the scriptures and other writings or talks is all theory. What you have to do now is to enter the laboratory and start doing the experiment yourself.” I understood the meaning of *deekṣaa*. Baba said, “Putting you in the laboratory of spiritual experiments, is called ***deekṣaa*** or **Initiation**.”

Now, this experiment is not like the other experiments of science. In science, we experiment with the objects. In this spiritual laboratory, the experiment is with our ‘Subject’. **The experimental object is our own being - our own mind and intelligence. The experimental results are the findings from the life and sādhanā of each sādhanaka.** From time immemorial, so many sādhanakas have recorded their experiences. They have recorded their discoveries, the pitfalls, cautions and the guidelines. They have recorded all these for the benefit of posterity. That is how the śāstras have evolved. So, in the spiritual field, each life of sādhanā is an experiment and the results have to be compared with the words of the Guru and the śāstras.

Nachiketa - The Model Seeker

I have digressed a lot. Starting with the Śaanti Mantra, I have not even begun the story of Kaṭhōpaniṣad, though I have been discussing the essence of the Kaṭhōpaniṣad. In Kaṭhōpaniṣad, the author takes the help of a simple story. The imagery in the story may make us think: “O, these are all mythological, and not facts.” Well, the story might be mythological, but our focus has to be on the lessons, on **the points of sādhana illustrated through the characters**. We have to try to understand what the Saint author wants to point out through the story.

The Kaṭhōpaniṣad speaks of a small boy, Nachiketa, as its model seeker. In the beginning, it also speaks about his father, Vājaśravas, as a contrast. The author beautifully contrasts the attitude and behaviour of the father and the son to exemplify what makes a seeker fit for receiving Brahmadeya. The father, a learned ritualist, is performing one of the greatest Yāgas (sacrifices), Viśvajit Yāga, which, according to the Vedas, will take him to heaven after death. And the son, a seven or eight-year-old boy, is just in the beginning of his Brahmacharya life. He might not have learnt various scriptures or done any Yāga, but he is observing keenly what his father is doing.

The scene depicts the concluding part of the Yāga in which Dāna (gifting) constitutes the most important event. The *Yajamaana* (the person performing the Yāga) is supposed to gift to the priests and other recipients the best and the most useful things liberally. But, Nachiketa's father is gifting to the priests all the useless cows from his cowshed – old cows who cannot even eat well, cows with defective organs and who will not calve any more. And to whom is he giving? To the priests who have performed the great Yāga for him to go to the heaven!

Now, the Vedas have said that if you are desirous of heaven you perform these Yāgas. But, they have also enjoined what you should do or should not do during and after the Yāga. About gifting they have prescribed: *śraddhayaa deyam, śriyaa deyam, hriyaa deyam*, etc. **Any gift should be offered with honour, grace and modesty. The purpose of the Daana is to expand and purify our mind.** Attracted by the heaven we will perform the Yāgas. But, if we follow all the prescriptions of the Yaagas, then the performance will make us liberal and pure. Unless we follow these prescriptions the purpose of the ritual will not be fulfilled. Out of desire for heaven, Vaajaśravas is doing the Yāga. But, because of his greed and possessiveness for the properties of this world he is

violating the injunctions of the very same Vedas. Will he then be taken to heaven or hell?

Seeing his father gifting all the useless items to the priests – the Upanishad says, *Śraddhaa aaviveśa – śraddhaa* dawned in Nachiketa's mind. This one word *śraddhaa*, we can meditate on throughout our life. We will get more and more jewels from it. That is why Bhagavadgeeta says: "*Śraddhaamayō'yaṁ puruṣaḥ yo yacchraddhaḥ sa eva saḥ*." We are made of our *śraddhaa*, our attention. **Our life will be moulded according to that which is given the supreme place in our mind.**

What is the *śraddhaa* of a seeker? It is the value and attention he gives to the words of the Wise and the scriptures. Whatever Nachiketa had learnt about the sayings of the Acharyas and the scriptures, he had faith in that. He thought, "Why is my father not abiding by the wise injunctions? I am sure he will be taken to hell! I have to somehow save him from this dire consequence."

The Upanishad starts with the word *Uśan*, which means "**desirous of**". Desirous of heaven, Vaajaśravas was performing the great Yāga. His mind was smitten with desire for heavenly attainment as well as worldly

possessions. We can easily understand where lies the emphasis. And at the end, the Upanishad says:

*Yadā sarve pramucyante
kā mā ye'sya hṛdi śritāḥ |
Atha martyo'mṛto bhavati
atra brahma samaśnute ||*
(2.3.14)

– When all the **desires** clinging to the heart fall off, the mortal man becomes immortal; he realizes the Brahman here itself. He does not have to wait till the body falls.

So, seven year old Nachiketa could understand the grave wrong his father was doing. How could he understand? Because of the purity of his mind – **his mind was not clouded by desires**. Because of his humility and *śraddha* that failed to grace his father's mind. Not that Vaajaśravas did not know that what he was doing was wrong. His inner voice must have been there; but he was refusing to heed it because of his uncontrolled desire for the worldly objects as well as the heavenly attainments.

Seeing the useless cows being gifted to the priests, Nachiketa felt very sorry and anxious: “By this behaviour of my father, he will certainly be taken to

hell.” He was a humble, pure-minded boy. His only concern was how to save his father. Finally he thought, “The most virtuous gift a person can offer is his son. If my father can give me as Dāna, then all his sin for offering the useless cows to the priests will be expiated.”

So, Nachiketa went to his father and asked, “O my dear Father! To whom will you gift me?” The father did not reply. Nachiketa asked once, twice, thrice. Finally the father burst out in anger: “*Mṛtyave tvāṃ dadāmi* – I shall give you to death.”

Cursing the son to death! Can there be a greater fall for a father? Such a ritualistic father who must have studied quite a lot of scriptures! The son too was exceptionally noble and had not done anything wrong – he only wanted to save his father from going to hell! Such a son Vaajaśravas was cursing to death!

The Upanishad is pointing out the level of degeneration, desire and greed can take us to if they are not treated and purified at the right time by wisdom – by the words of the scriptures. Overpowered by greed for worldly objects or otherworldly attainments, when we flout the scriptural directions and injunctions, it can lead us to any inauspicious consequence. Vaajaśravas’ character shows us that one may read many scriptures

or perform hundreds of rituals, but if the mind is not purified he will fall from the auspicious path.

From Constricted Identity to Universal Identity

In life, we start from the ignorant state, where we think ourselves to be small, limited by our body-mind personality. Whenever we refer to 'I', as our own self, we identify with our body-mind limited personality. But the Upanishads speak about the Ultimate Goal, which is *Brahmātmaikatvabodha* – *Brahma-ātmā-ekatva-bodha*. Brahman is the all-pervading Consciousness on which the whole Universe appears to be. And ātmā is the Subject Consciousness within us. Generally the two are wide apart in our understanding. But the Upanishads exhort us to realize through the purification of our mind the identity of Brahman and ātmā – where my 'I', your 'I' and his 'I' will not be different; there will be only one Universal Consciousness or Brahman. That is called *Brahmātmaikatvabodha*.

So, our journey is from the constricted body-mind identity to the unlimited universal identity – from *Dehātmabodha* to *Brahmātmaikatvabodha*. And, what is the sādhanā for that? Whatever makes our mind expand, that alone can take us to the final universal

expansion. That is the *sādhana*. Whatever constricts our mind, surely takes us away from the goal. That is anti-*sādhana*. All of us can find out looking into our own mind whether any action, word or thought is constricting our mind or expanding our mind.

Now, in the case of *Vaajaśravas*, we find that he was getting more and more constricted by his behaviour. Although he was performing *Daana*, which should expand his mind, he was doing it in a manner that would constrict his mind further. The greed for futile worldly possessions was clouding his *viveka* – discrimination. Whereas young *Nachiketa* could understand that his father was not on the right path: “My father will get more and more constricted by his sinful behaviour and that constriction is the real hell.” Truly speaking, whatever constricts us is *pāpa* (sin) and whatever expands us is *puṇya* (virtue). When we understand our *Brahmātmakatva*, we become universally expanded.

When *Nachiketa* asked his father to gift him to the priests, the father got angry and cursed him to death. But, *Nachiketa* still remained composed. Because he was pure-minded, he did not retort back immediately: “O Father, what you are doing is wrong. I wanted to correct you and you are cursing me to death!” No. He

did not have such a narrow mind, egoistic mind. He was humble and impersonal. He thought, “Well, my father has said something. May be he has cursed me in anger. After all he is my father. What am I to do as a worthy son?”

Again, *śraddhaa* was dominating his mind. He thought: “The Wise Ṛshis of the past and the present have always given Truth the highest pedestal. Whatever my father has uttered must come true. I must go to Yamaraja, the Lord of Death.” In Ramayana too, the pure-minded Rama felt the same way! When Daśaratha told Rama about his promise to Kaikeyi that he would send Rama to the forest, Rama did not think of justice or injustice. He was firm in his decision: “Be it fourteen years of forest-exile, my father’s words have to be kept.”

Vaajaśravas does not appear any more in the Upanishad. His character has been presented to point out that learning or performance of rituals does not make one a fit recipient of Knowledge if the mind is haunted by desires – worldly or otherworldly. In contrast, Nachiketa’s character exemplifies the qualities of a deserving seeker.

Qualities of a True Seeker

So, Nachiketa left for Yama's palace. When he reached, Yamaraja was not there. Three days and three nights, without any food or drink, Nachiketa had to wait for Yamaraja to return. Now, why did the Author make Nachiketa wait for three days and three nights? We said that the Upanishad is sādhana-oriented. We have to look for the hints given for a seeker of Truth – what qualities of Nachiketa are emphasized through this episode.

Nachiketa had gone to Yama's palace for a certain purpose. Even when he did not find Yama there, he did not come back saying: "Oh, I have been waiting and waiting! Who knows where Yamaraja has gone! Let me go back." – which most of us will do. He did not even go around looking for food or drink – remained there in Upavaasa (fasting), waiting for Yamaraja's return. We should not miss the qualities of a seeker exemplified by the imaginary episode. In scriptural language it is called *saadhana-catustayam* (the four-fold pursuit) consisting of *viveka* (discrimination), *vairāgya* (dispassion), *śamādi ṣaṭka-sampattiḥ* (which is a combination of six virtues: *śama*, *dama*, *titikṣā*, *uparati*, *śraddhā* and *samādhāna*) and *mumukṣutva* (yearning for liberation).

When Yama came back and offered him three boons against the three nights he fasted at Yama's door, the first boon Nachiketa asked for was: "My father must be very sorry after cursing me to death. His mind should become restful. He should also be rid of anger." This is the quality of a seeker. The father who cursed him to death – his suffering filled Nachiketa's mind. He did not have any worldly desire that he could think of fulfilling through the boons. Naturally, the father's plight occupied his mind.

We may think that a seeker of Truth or a Sannyasin should not love or be considerate towards his father, mother or other relations. It is not at all so. **A person who loves his family and friends, who loves the country and the society, alone can become a loving Sannyasin!** A person who cannot love his near ones – can he love the whole Universe? Is it ever possible? Only when a person loves the people around, there is a possibility of expanding his love to embrace the whole world. That is what the Upanishad is pointing out through the behaviour of Nachiketa.

Now, against the second boon, Nachiketa wanted to learn *Agnividyaa* for the benefit of the people and in the process, proved his exceptional attention (*śraddhaa*) as a student. Finally as the third boon, the

last boon, Nachiketa puts forward the deepest enquiry of his heart:

*Yeyaṃ prete vicikitsā manuṣye
astītye ke nāyamastīti caike |
Etad-vidyām-anuśiṣṭastvayāhaṃ
varāṇām-eṣa varastṛtīyaḥ ||*
(1.1.20)

He is asking Yama, the Lord of Death, about what happens when the body falls: “Some people say that the *ātmā* exists while some others say that it does not. I would like to know the truth about this under your tutelage.” It is a very significant statement. Nachiketa uses the word “***anuśiṣṭastvayaaham***” – **I shall learn by undergoing the discipline and guidance given by you.**

It is not that the Knower will tell me what happens after death and I will go away with the information. It is not so. Nachiketa knew that it is not so. He understood that the **Knowledge of what happens after death or what is the Transcendental Existence in man that survives the fall of one’s body, cannot just be had by listening to the statements of anybody.** He understood that he had to be disciplined and guided on this path by the Wise Teacher. Only then the Truth will be **revealed in him.** Otherwise the revelation will not take place. From this

statement of Nachiketa we can easily discover his depth and maturity as a true seeker of Brahmailidyaa.

To test the deservingness of Nachiketa as a seeker of Truth, to ascertain the purity and one-pointedness of his mind, Yamaraja then goes on alluring him with all kinds of worldly and heavenly gifts: “Don’t ask me about death. Even Gods of the heaven are confused about it. Ask from me any bounty a man can think of. I shall also give you a long life span and the health to enjoy all these. Be the Emperor of the entire earth. But please don’t ask me what happens after death!”

Four Cardinal Observations

But, Nachiketa was not to be attracted by any of these. He remained firm in his enquiry. His viveka and vairaagya are beautifully exemplified through four cardinal statements and observations, which are like four jewels of Kaṭhopaniṣad. Mind you, they are not coming from Yamaraja, the Teacher; they are coming from the disciple Nachiketa. Nachiketa says:

*Śvobhāvā martyasya yad-antakaitat
sarvendriyāṇām jarayanti tejaḥ |
Api sarvaṃ jīvitam-alpam-eva
tavaiva vāhās-tava nṛtyagīte ||*
(1.1.26)

“O Lord of Death, whatever enjoyable gifts you have offered me are all short-lived. They are all **śvaḥ abhaavaḥ** – they may not be there even tomorrow. Moreover, the result of all these sense-enjoyments is: **sarvendriyāṇām jarayanti tejaḥ** – they will only deplete our organs of their brilliance and power! And O Yamaraja, you have offered me an unlimited span of life. But, I know: **Api sarvaṃ jīvitam-alpam-eva** – whatever be the life span of a man, it is always *alpam* – insufficient – for him.” Why?

We find that a person who has lived for fifty years does not want to die. Even after living for hundred years one is not ready to die. **Because, as long as our desire for worldly enjoyments lingers, we are not fulfilled in life, we are not ready to embrace death.** So, by increasing the life span by any amount, no one is going to be satisfied, no one will be free of the fear of death. Even before the last breath one will crave to enjoy more. Is not life then insufficient for everybody, irrespective of the life span?

Am I clear? As long as the desires persist, the life remains insufficient. Only when the desires get attenuated, one becomes free of the fear of death; **one becomes ready to leave any time.**

Then comes Nachiketa's fourth statement: "***Na vittena tarpaṇīyo manuṣyo***" – man can never be satisfied by material possession. Therefore, he appealed, "O Yamaraja, please don't try to lure me any more! I know that these material possessions are not going to fulfill me. I am not interested in them. So, *tavaiva vāhās-tava nṛtyagīte* – Let all these chariots, musicians and the danseuses and what not, remain with you. I am only interested in the knowledge of the Transcendental Truth. Teach me what survives when the body falls."

One Goal – The Quintessence of All Śāstras

Finally Nachiketa proves that all the four qualities (*saadhana-catusṭaya*) needed of a seeker he has in ample measure. Yama not only agrees to impart to him Brahmanvidyaa, he in fact expresses his overflowing joy in having a disciple like Nachiketa. After giving some initial guidelines and cautions, and also explaining why he considered Nachiketa to be a fit recipient of Brahmanvidyaa, Yama starts his instruction with a beautiful synthesis and clarification (1.2.15):

*Sarve vedā yat-padam-āmananti
 tapāṃsi sarvāṇi ca yad-vadanti |
 Yadicchanto brahmacaryaṃ caranti
 tat-te padam saṃgrahaṇa bravīmy-om-ityetat ||*

He says: “The one Goal that all the Vedas expound and elucidate, aiming which all the austerities are performed, and aspiring which people pursue brahmacharya, I shall speak to you about the essence of that Goal. It is OM.”

Sometimes one portion of the Vedas apparently contradicts the other. So, for a seeker the statements may appear confusing. So many different kinds of austerities people resort to – some undertake fasting, some sit with five fires around, some meditate in a secluded cave, some practice celibacy. **The seeker is likely to get confused seeing the diversity.** Yama, in order to remove the doubts and confusions from Nachiketa’s mind, confirms that all these have the same final Goal that is represented by “Om.”

Om represents Brahmailidya, the realization of the Ultimate Truth. The path to this goal is basically one of purifying and expanding the mind, making it free of desires. **Although the practices appear to be divergent, their sole purpose is to gradually make the mind one-pointed by taking it away from worldliness.** So, if our pooja, rituals and whatever else we do in the name of religion or spirituality fail to take us forward on the path of purity and expansion, they lose their purpose.

Yama is saying: *saṅgrahaṇa bravīmi* – I shall tell you in essence. *Saṅgraha* is *samyak grahaṇa*. It does not mean briefly. The Acharya or the Guru takes the quintessence of all the scriptures and passes it to the disciple. So, what Yama means is: “O Nachiketa, you don’t have to worry seeing the variety and the contradictions. You don’t have to read the thousands of Śaāstras. I shall teach you the essential Truth expounded in the Śaāstras, so that you can attain the ultimate Goal.”

There lies the contribution of the Guru. We may read thousands of Śaāstras and get confused. But the Guru will never ask us to read all the texts. He will give us the **quintessential sādhana leading to the final attainment from which the Śaāstras themselves have originated**. He will guide our pursuit through which the mind will be purified and we will be led to the transcendental state, from where we can identify ourselves with all the statements of the Śaāstras.

Fulfillment – Emotional & Intelligential

Actually to know the Truth, nobody has to die. Yamaraja reveals at the end: “**If you have to realize the Transcendental Existence that survives death, you have to know It here and now!**” There is no question of

knowing it after the body falls. He categorically asserts:
“*Atra brahma samaśnute.*”

*Yadā sarve pramucyante
kā mā ye'sya hṛdi śritāḥ |
Atha martyo'mṛto bhavati
atra brahma samaśnute ||*
(2.3.14)

“When all the desires clinging to one's heart fall off, the mortal man becomes immortal and he attains Brahman here itself.” Desires are like knots in our mind and heart. They make the mind constricted, and the intelligence opaque and complicated. Muṇḍakopaniṣad also says:

*Bhidyate hṛdaya granthiḥ
chidyante sarva-saṁśayāḥ |
Kṣīyante cāsyā karmāṇi
tasmin dṛṣṭe parāvare ||*
(2.2.8)

“When the sādḥaka realizes the Self as abiding in both small and great, the knots of his heart get broken, his doubts dissolve and he becomes free of the bondage of doership.”

Brahmavidyaa promises two kinds of fulfillment for man: emotional fulfillment and intelligential fulfillment.

Emotionally we always feel restricted, constricted, unsatisfied. Our mind is never fulfilled, because it is smitten with desires. The other lack of fulfillment is with the intelligence. The intelligence is never doubt-free and poised. It is never sure or confident about the true path or attainment. Spirituality as presented in the Upanishads, makes the human being fulfilled in both these aspects.

Emotional fulfillment results from the purification of the mind, the effacement of ego. Intellectual fulfillment comes from the dissolution of all doubts. *Hṛdaya-granthiḥ* refers to the ego – the emotional knots, and *samsāyāḥ* (doubts) refer to the bondage of our intelligence. Both are caused by ignorance which gives rise to desires. The Upanishad started with the word ‘desire’ (The first word of Kaṭhopanishad is ‘*uśan*’ meaning ‘desirous of’) and concludes with the ‘removal of desire’. Desire is the fundamental point here the Upanishad urges us to attend to.

Indispensability of self-effort

We need not read many scriptures, many Upanishads. Even a single Upanishad is sufficient provided we understand the fundamental note and look within ourselves to see what is happening inside. In each

thought, word and action, we have to watch: “Am I getting constricted or am I getting expanded?” It has to be practised every moment. The responsibility rests entirely with us.

Kaṭhōpaniṣad categorically tells us in the second chapter: Don’t say, “It is all Destiny! The time has not come for me to practise spirituality.” The world comes to you with two options: *śreyaḥ*, the auspicious, and *preyaḥ*, the pleasurable. You have to decide which of the two you want. *Śreyaḥ* may not be immediately pleasurable but it will take you to the ultimate auspicious Goal. *Preyaḥ* is immediately pleasurable but will take you away from the auspicious goal. It is for you to discriminate and introspect every moment of life: “Am I looking for *preyaḥ* or am I looking for *śreyaḥ*? Am I always choosing *śreyaḥ* in preference to *preyaḥ*?” The responsibility of the choice rests fully on you. That is what Kaṭhōpaniṣad emphasizes again and again.

Bhāgavatam – The Essence of Upanishads

When I opened the last portion of Sreemad Bhāgavatam – the concluding verses of 12th skandha 13th chapter, I found that whatever the Kaṭhōpaniṣad or the other Upanishads say, it is simply that. There is no difference at all. And Bhāgavatam is spoken of as the *sāra*

(essence) of the Upanishads. Verse 12.13.18, which was sung as our inaugural invocation, says:

*Śreemad bhāgavatam purāṇamamalaṃ
yad-vaiṣṇavānāṃ priyaṃ
yasmin pāramahaṃsyam-ekam-amalaṃ
jñānaṃ paraṃ gīyate |*

*Tatra jñāna-virāga-bhakti-sahitaṃ
naiṣkarmyam-āviṣkṛtaṃ
tacchṛṇvan vipaṭhan vicāraṇa-paro
bhaktyā vimucyen-naraḥ ||*

*Yasmin pāramahaṃsyam-ekam-amalaṃ jñānaṃ
paraṃ gīyate* – Sreemad Bhāgavatam sings the
supreme Knowledge which is *advaya* (non-dual),
which is pure and which is carried by the
Paramahaṃsas. Who is a Paramahaṃsa? Haṃsa is
our ātmā. And a person who has realized that his ātmā
itself is the Paramātmā, the one Brahman, is called a
Paramahaṃsa. This is what the Upanishads call
Brahmātmāikatva-bodha. Paramahaṃsas carry the
knowledge. They are the living Truth. They are the
living Upanishads.

*“Tatra jñāna-virāga-bhakti-sahitaṃ
naiṣkarmyam-āviṣkṛtaṃ.” Naiṣkarmyam-
āviṣkṛtaṃ* – I was struck by the words. I thought about
it, what is this **āviṣkṛtaṃ**? *Aaviḥ* means light. The real

light is our Consciousness. *Aaviḥ kṛtam*. It is not the external *naiṣkarmya* (non-activity) of the idlers, that I don't do anything at all. Not at all! Through the assiduous practice of *jñāna*, *vairāgya* and *bhakti*, what happens is that **we discover 'Naiṣkarmya' *within* us** – that I am not the doer, I am not the enjoyer. **The truth of Naiṣkarmya gets revealed and actualized in us.** That is the real 'Naiṣkarmya'. Naiṣkarmya is not sitting idle doing nothing.

The next verse (12.13.19) says:

*Kasmai yena vibhāsito'yam-atulo jñāna-
pradīpaḥ purā*

*.... satyaṁ paraṁ dhīmahi **

“That ancient flame of spiritual Knowledge which has been transmitted by Brahman itself to Brahmaa, the Creator, and then Brahman in the form of Brahmaa passed it on to Naarada, and then in the form of Naarada imparted it to Vyaasadeva, and in the form of Vyaasadeva bestowed it to Śuka, and finally in the form of Śuka imparted it to Pareekshit – that Supreme, pure and blissful Truth (satyam) we meditate upon.”

The Author is referring to Bhāgavatam – not the book Bhāgavatam, but the Knowledge presented in Bhāgavatam. The Knowledge is one and the same. Assuming the forms of different Knowers in different

times it has been passed on from generation to generation since times immemorial.

Six verses before (in verse: 12.13.12) I found: “*Sarva-vedānta-sāraṃ yad-brahmaatmaikatva-lakṣaṇam*” – Bhāgavatam is the essence of all Vedantic texts and its distinctive characteristic is the identity of the Self and the Brahman. So the word *brahmaatmaikatva* is also there!

Many thoughts are coming to my mind. But it is OK. The fundamental point has been covered more or less. *OM sahanāvavatu saha nau bhunaktu..... śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ.*

Harih Om Tat Sat. Jai Guru.

* * *

Swami Nirviseshananda Tirtha

Swami Nirviseshananda Tirtha is a sannyasin (renunciate) disciple of Poojya Swami Bhoomananda Tirtha. He evinced a strong inclination for the spiritual path from a very young age. At 24, he was initiated into the pursuit of Brahma-vidya (Self-knowledge) by Baba Gangadhara Paramahansa of Dakshinkhanda, West Bengal, India.

A PhD in Physics, he was a scientist and assistant professor in the Radar & Communication Centre of IIT - Kharagpur. In 1987, he renounced his professional life and dedicated himself wholesomely to spiritual pursuit and the service of Poojya Swami Bhoomananda Tirtha.

Whether in his experiential rational approach to Vedanta or his striving for excellence in any endeavour, Swami Nirviseshananda's keen insight, rare clarity, gentle humour and love are a source of inspiration and guidance for all seekers.



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