

Katha Upanishad

The dialogue of the boy Nachiketa with Yama, lord of death

TRANSLATION

Friedrich Max Müller · 1884

SOURCE

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LICENCE

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What follows is the complete text of the Katha Upanishad in Friedrich Max Müller's translation, published as part of the Sacred Books of the East, Volume 15 (Oxford University Press, 1884). The text is divided into two adhyayas of three vallis each. Sanskrit terms (Atman, Brahman, Aum, and so on) are kept; archaic English verb forms and pronouns have been lightly modernised.

FIRST ADHYĀYA.

FIRST VALLĪ

1. VĀGASRAVASA, desirous (of heavenly rewards), surrendered (at a sacrifice) all that he possessed. He had a son of the name of Nakiketas.
2. When the (promised) presents were being given (to the priests), faith entered into the heart of Nakiketas, who was still a boy, and he thought:
3. 'Unblessed, surely, are the worlds to which a man goes by giving (as his promised present at a sacrifice) cows which have drunk water, eaten hay, given their milk, and are barren.'
4. He (knowing that his father had promised to give up all that he possessed, and therefore his son also) said to his father: 'Dear father, to whom will you give me?'

He said it a second and a third time. Then the father replied (angrily):

'I shall give you unto Death.'

(The father, having once said so, though in haste, had to be true to his word and to sacrifice his son.)

1. The son said: 'I go as the first, at the head of many (who have still to die); I go in the midst of many (who are now dying). What will be the work of Yama (the ruler of the departed) which to-day he has to do unto me?'
2. 'Look back how it was with those who came before, look forward how it will be with those who come hereafter. A mortal ripens like corn, like corn he springs up again.'

(Nakiketas enters into the abode of Yama Vaivasvata, and there is no one to receive him. Thereupon one of the attendants of Yama is supposed to say:)

1. 'Fire enters into the houses, when a Brāhmana enters as a guest. That fire is quenched by this peace-offering;--bring water, O Vaivasvata!'
2. 'A Brāhmana that dwells in the house of a foolish man without receiving food to eat, destroys his hopes and expectations, his possessions, his righteousness, his sacred and his good deeds, and all his sons and cattle.'

(Yama, returning to his house after an absence of three nights, during which time Nakiketas had received no hospitality from him, says:)

1. 'O Brâhmana, as you, a venerable guest, have dwelt in my house three nights without eating, therefore choose now three boons. Hail to you! and welfare to me!'

1. Nakiketas said: 'O Death, as the first of the three boons I choose that Gautama, my father, be pacified, kind, and free from anger towards me; and that he may know me and greet me, when I shall have been dismissed by you.'

2. Yama said: 'Through my favour Auddâlaki Âruni, your father, will know you, and be again towards you as he was before. He shall sleep peacefully through the night, and free from anger, after having seen you freed from the mouth of death.'

3. Nakiketas said: 'In the heaven-world there is no fear; you are not there, O Death, and no one is afraid on account of old age. Leaving behind both hunger and thirst, and out of the reach of sorrow, all rejoice in the world of heaven.'

4. 'You know, O Death, the fire-sacrifice which leads us to heaven; tell it to me, for I am full of faith. Those who live in the heaven-world reach immortality,--this I ask as my second boon.'

5. Yama said: 'I tell it you, learn it from me, and when you understandest that fire-sacrifice which leads to heaven, know, O Nakiketas, that it is the attainment of the endless worlds, and their firm support, hidden in darkness.'

6. Yama then told him that fire-sacrifice, the beginning of all the worlds, and what bricks are

required for the altar, and how many, and how they are to be placed. And Nakiketas repeated all as it had been told to him. Then Mrityu, being pleased with him, said again:

1. The generous, being satisfied, said to him:

I give you now another boon; that fire-sacrifice shall be named after you, take also this many-coloured chain.'

1. 'He who has three times performed this Nâkiketa rite, and has been united with the three (father, mother, and teacher), and has performed the three duties (study, sacrifice, almsgiving) overcomes birth and death. When he has learnt and understood this fire, which knows (or makes us know) all that is born of Brahman, which is venerable and divine, then he obtains everlasting peace.'

2. 'He who knows the three Nâkiketa fires, and knowing the three, piles up the Nâkiketa sacrifice, he, having first thrown off the chains of death, rejoices in the world of heaven, beyond the reach of grief.'

3. 'This, O Nakiketas, is your fire which leads to heaven, and which you have chosen as your second boon. That fire all men will proclaim. Choose now, O Nakiketas, your third boon.'
4. Nakiketas said: 'There is that doubt, when a man is dead,--some saying, he is; others, he is not. This I should like to know, taught by you; this is the third of my boons.'
5. Death said: 'On this point even the gods

have doubted formerly; it is not easy to understand. That subject is subtle. Choose another boon, O Nakiketas, do not press me, and let me off that boon.'

1. Nakiketas said: 'On this point even the gods have doubted indeed, and you, Death, have declared it to be not easy to understand, and another teacher like you is not to be found:--surely no other boon is like unto this.'
2. Death said: 'Choose sons and grandsons who shall live a hundred years, herds of cattle, elephants, gold, and horses. Choose the wide abode of the earth, and live thyself as many harvests as you desirest.'
3. 'If you can think of any boon equal to that, choose wealth, and long life. Be (king), Nakiketas, on the wide earth. I make you the enjoyer of all desires.'
4. 'Whatever desires are difficult to attain among mortals, ask for them according to your wish;--these fair maidens with their chariots and musical instruments,--such are indeed not to be obtained by men,--be waited on by them whom I give to you, but do not ask me about dying.'
5. Nakiketas said: 'These things last till tomorrow, O Death, for they wear out this vigour of all the senses. Even the whole of life is short. Keep you your horses, keep dance and song for thyself.'
6. 'No man can be made happy by wealth. Shall we possess wealth, when we see you? Shall we live,

as long as you rulest? Only that boon (which I have chosen) is to be chosen by me.'

1. 'What mortal, slowly decaying here below, and knowing, after having approached them, the freedom from decay enjoyed by the immortals, would delight in a long life, after he has pondered on the pleasures which arise from beauty and love?'
2. 'No, that on which there is this doubt, O Death, tell us what there is in that great Hereafter. Nakiketas does not choose another boon but that which enters into the hidden world.'

SECOND VALLÎ

1. Death said: 'The good is one thing, the pleasant another; these two, having different objects, chain a man. It is well with him who clings to the good; he who chooses the pleasant, misses his end.'

2. 'The good and the pleasant approach man: the wise goes round about them and distinguishes them. Yea, the wise prefers the good to the pleasant, but the fool chooses the pleasant through greed and avarice.'
3. 'You, O Nakiketas, after pondering all pleasures that are or seem delightful, have dismissed them all. You have not gone into the road that leads to wealth, in which many men perish.'
4. 'Wide apart and leading to different points are these two, ignorance, and what is known as wisdom. I believe Nakiketas to be one who desires knowledge, for even many pleasures did not tear you away.'
5. 'Fools dwelling in darkness, wise in their own conceit, and puffed up with vain knowledge, go round and round, staggering to and fro, like blind men led by the blind.'
6. 'The Hereafter never rises before the eyes of the careless child, deluded by the delusion of wealth. "This is the world," he thinks, "there is no other;"--thus he falls again and again under my sway.'
7. 'He (the Self) of whom many are not even able

to hear, whom many, even when they hear of him, do not comprehend; wonderful is a man, when found, who is able to teach him (the Self); wonderful is he who comprehends him, when taught by an able teacher.'

1. 'That (Self), when taught by an inferior man, is not easy to be known, even though often thought upon; unless it be taught by another, there is no way to it, for it is inconceivably smaller than what is small.'
2. 'That doctrine is not to be obtained by argument, but when it is declared by another, then, O dearest, it is easy to understand. You have obtained it now; you art truly a man of true resolve. May we have always an inquirer like you!'
3. Nakiketas said: 'I know that what is called a treasure is transient, for that eternal is not obtained by things which are not eternal. Hence the Nâkiketa fire(-sacrifice) has been laid by me (first); then, by means of transient things, I have obtained what is not transient (the teaching of Yama).'
4. Yama said: 'Though you hadst seen the fulfilment of all desires, the foundation of the world, the endless rewards of good deeds, the shore where

there is no fear, that which is magnified by praise, the wide abode, the rest, yet being wise you have with firm resolve dismissed it all.'

1. 'The wise who, by means of meditation on his Self, recognises the Ancient, who is difficult to be seen, who has entered into the dark, who is hidden in the cave, who dwells in the abyss, as God, he indeed leaves joy and sorrow far behind.'

2. 'A mortal who has heard this and embraced it, who has separated from it all qualities, and has thus reached the subtle Being, rejoices, because he has obtained what is a cause for rejoicing. The house (of Brahman) is open, I believe, O Nakiketas.'
3. Nakiketas said: 'That which you seest as neither this nor that, as neither effect nor cause, as neither past nor future, tell me that.'
4. Yama said: 'That word (or place) which all the Vedas record, which all penances proclaim, which men desire when they live as religious students, that word I tell you briefly, it is Om.'
5. 'That (imperishable) syllable means Brahman, that syllable means the highest (Brahman); he who knows that syllable, whatever he desires, is his.'
6. 'This is the best support, this is the highest support; he who knows that support is magnified in the world of Brahmâ.'
7. 'The knowing (Self) is not born, it dies not; it sprang from nothing, nothing sprang from it. The

[paragraph continues] Ancient is unborn, eternal, everlasting; he is not killed, though the body is killed.'

1. 'If the killer 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.'
2. 'The Self, smaller than small, greater than great, is hidden in the heart of that creature. A man who is free from desires and free from grief, sees the majesty of the Self by the grace of the Creator.'
3. 'Though sitting still, he walks far; though lying down, he goes everywhere. Who, save myself, is able to know that God who rejoices and rejoices not?'
4. 'The wise who knows the Self as bodiless within the bodies, as unchanging among changing things, as great and omnipresent, does never grieve.'
5. 'That Self cannot be gained by the Veda, nor by understanding, nor by much learning. He whom the Self chooses, by him the Self can be gained. The Self chooses him (his body) as his own.'
6. 'But he who has not first turned away from his wickedness, who is not tranquil, and subdued, or whose mind is not at rest, he can never obtain the Self (even) by knowledge!'
7. 'Who then knows where He is, He to whom the Brahmans and Kshatriyas are (as it were) but food, and death itself a condiment?'

THIRD VALLÎ

1. 'There are the two, drinking their reward in the world of their own works, entered into the cave (of the heart), dwelling on the highest summit (the ether in the heart). Those who know Brahman call them shade and light; likewise, those householders who perform the Trinâkiketa sacrifice.'

2. 'May we be able to master that Nákiketa rite which is a bridge for sacrificers; also that which is the highest, imperishable Brahman for those who wish to cross over to the fearless shore.'
3. 'Know the Self to be sitting in the chariot, the body to be the chariot, the intellect (buddhi) the charioteer, and the mind the reins.'
4. 'The senses they call the horses, the objects of the senses their roads. When he (the Highest Self) is in union with the body, the senses, and the mind, then wise people call him the Enjoyer.'
5. 'He who has no understanding and whose mind

[paragraph continues] (the reins) is never firmly held, his senses (horses) are unmanageable, like vicious horses of a charioteer.'

1. 'But he who has understanding and whose mind is always firmly held, his senses are under control, like good horses of a charioteer.'
2. 'He who has no understanding, who is unmindful and always impure, never reaches that place, but enters into the round of births.'
3. 'But he who has understanding, who is mindful and always pure, reaches indeed that place, from whence he is not born again.'
4. 'But he who has understanding for his charioteer, and who holds the reins of the mind, he reaches the end of his journey, and that is the highest place of Vishnu.'
5. 'Beyond the senses there are the objects, beyond the objects there is the mind, beyond the mind there is the intellect, the Great Self is beyond the intellect.'
6. 'Beyond the Great there is the Undeveloped, beyond the Undeveloped there is the Person (purusha). Beyond the Person there is nothing--this is the goal, the highest road.'
7. 'That Self is hidden in all beings and does not shine forth, but it is seen by subtle seers through their sharp and subtle intellect.'
8. 'A wise man should keep down speech and mind; he should keep them within the Self which is knowledge; he should keep knowledge within the Self which is the Great; and he should keep that (the Great) within the Self which is the Quiet.'
9. 'Rise, awake! having obtained your boons,

understand them! The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path (to the Self) is hard.'

1. 'He who has perceived that which is without sound, without touch, without form, without decay, without taste, eternal, without smell, without beginning, without end, beyond the Great, and unchangeable, is freed from the jaws of death.'

2. 'A wise man who has repeated or heard the ancient story of Nakiketas told by Death, is magnified in the world of Brahman.'
3. 'And he who repeats this greatest mystery in an assembly of Brâhmanas, or full of devotion at the time of the Srâddha sacrifice, obtains thereby infinite rewards.'

SECOND ADHYÂYA.

FOURTH VALLÎ.

1. Death said: 'The Self-existent pierced the openings (of the senses) so that they turn forward: therefore man looks forward, not backward into himself. Some wise man, however, with his eyes closed and wishing for immortality, saw the Self behind.'
2. 'Children follow after outward pleasures, and fall into the snare of wide-spread death. Wise men only, knowing the nature of what is immortal, do not look for anything stable here among things unstable.'
3. 'That by which we know form, taste, smell, sounds, and loving touches, by that also we know what exists besides. This is that (which you have asked for).'
4. 'The wise, when he knows that that by which he perceives all objects in sleep or in waking is the great omnipresent Self, grieves no more.'
5. 'He who knows this living soul which eats honey (perceives objects) as being the Self, always near, the Lord of the past and the future, henceforward fears no more. This is that.'
6. 'He who (knows) him who was born first from

the brooding heat (for he was born before the water), who, entering into the heart, abides therein, and was perceived from the elements. This is that.'

1. '(He who knows) Aditi also, who is one with all deities, who arises with Prâna (breath or Hiranyagarbha), who, entering into the heart, abides therein, and was born from the elements. This is that.'
2. 'There is Agni (fire), the all-seeing, hidden in the two fire-sticks, well-guarded like a child (in the womb) by the mother, day after day to be adored by men when they awake and bring oblations. This is that.'
3. 'And that whence the sun rises, and whither it goes to set, there all the Devas are contained, and no one goes beyond. This is that.'
4. 'What is here (visible in the world), the same is there (invisible in Brahman); and what is there, the same is here. He who sees any difference here (between Brahman and the world), goes from death to death.'

5. 'Even by the mind this (Brahman) is to be obtained, and then there is no difference whatsoever. He goes from death to death who sees any difference here.'
6. 'The person (purusha), of the size of a thumb, stands in the middle of the Self (body?), as lord of the past and the future, and henceforward fears no more. This is that.'
7. 'That person, of the size of a thumb, is like a light without smoke, lord of the past and the future, he is the same to-day and to-morrow. This is that.'
8. 'As rain-water that has fallen on a mountain-ridge runs down the rocks on all sides, thus does he, who sees a difference between qualities, run after them on all sides.'
9. 'As pure water poured into pure water remains the same, thus, O Gautama, is the Self of a thinker who knows.'

FIFTH VALLÎ.

1. 'There is a town with eleven gates belonging to the Unborn (Brahman), whose thoughts are never crooked. He who approaches it, grieves no more, and liberated (from all bonds of ignorance) becomes free. This is that.'
2. 'He (Brahman) is the swan (sun), dwelling in the bright heaven; he is the Vasu (air), dwelling in the sky; he is the sacrificer (fire), dwelling on the hearth; he is the guest (Soma), dwelling in the sacrificial jar; he dwells in men, in gods (vara), in the sacrifice (rita), in heaven; he is born in the water, on earth, in the sacrifice (rita), on the mountains; he is the True and the Great.'
3. 'He (Brahman) it is who sends up the breath (prâna), and who throws back the breath (apâna). All the Devas (senses) worship him, the adorable (or the dwarf), who sits in the centre.'
4. 'When that incorporated (Brahman), who dwells in the body, is torn away and freed from the body, what remains then? This is that.'
5. 'No mortal lives by the breath that goes up and by the breath that goes down. We live by another, in whom these two repose.'
6. 'Well then, O Gautama, I shall tell you this mystery, the old Brahman, and what happens to the Self, after reaching death.'
7. 'Some enter the womb in order to have a body, as organic beings, others go into inorganic matter, according to their work and according to their knowledge.'
8. 'He, the highest Person, who is awake in us while we are asleep, shaping one lovely sight after another, that indeed is the Bright, that is Brahman, that alone is called the Immortal. All worlds are contained in it, and no one goes beyond. This is that.'

9. 'As the one fire, after it has entered the world, though one, becomes different according to whatever it burns, thus the one Self within all things becomes different, according to whatever it enters, and exists also without.'
10. 'As the one air, after it has entered the world, though one, becomes different according to whatever it enters, thus the one Self within all things becomes different, according to whatever it enters, and exists also without.'
11. 'As the sun, the eye of the whole world, is not contaminated by the external impurities seen by the eyes, thus the one Self within all things is never contaminated by the misery of the world, being himself without.'
12. 'There is one ruler, the Self within all things, who makes the one form manifold. The wise who perceive him within their Self, to them belongs eternal happiness, not to others.'
13. 'There is one eternal thinker, thinking non-eternal

thoughts, who, though one, fulfils the desires of many. The wise who perceive him within their Self, to them belongs eternal peace, not to others.'

1. 'They perceive that highest indescribable pleasure, saying, This is that. How then can I understand it? Has it its own light, or does it reflect light?'
2. 'The sun does not shine there, nor the moon and the stars, nor these lightnings, and much less this fire. When he shines, everything shines after him; by his light all this is lighted.'

SIXTH VALLÎ.

1. 'There is that ancient tree, whose roots grow upward and whose branches grow downward;--that indeed is called the Bright, that is called Brahman, that alone is called the Immortal. All worlds are contained in it, and no one goes beyond. This is that.'
2. 'Whatever there is, the whole world, when gone forth (from the Brahman), trembles in its breath. That Brahman is a great terror, like a drawn sword. Those who know it become immortal.'
3. 'From terror of Brahman fire burns, from terror the sun burns, from terror Indra and Vâyu, and Death, as the fifth, run away.'
4. 'If a man could not understand it before the falling asunder of his body, then he has to take body again in the worlds of creation.'
5. 'As in a mirror, so (Brahman may be seen clearly) here in this 'body; as in a dream, in the world of the Fathers; as in the water, he is seen about in the world of the Gandharvas; as in light and shade, in the world of Brahmâ.'

6. 'Having understood that the senses are distinct (from the Âtman), and that their rising and setting (their waking and sleeping) belongs to them in their distinct existence (and not to the Âtman), a wise man grieves no more.'
 7. 'Beyond the senses is the mind, beyond the mind is the highest (created) Being, higher than that Being is the Great Self, higher than the Great, the highest Undeveloped.'
 8. 'Beyond the Undeveloped is the Person, the all-pervading and entirely imperceptible. Every creature that knows him is liberated, and obtains immortality.'
 9. 'His form is not to be seen, no one beholds him with the eye. He is imagined by the heart, by wisdom, by the mind. Those who know this, are immortal.'
 10. 'When the five instruments of knowledge stand still together with the mind, and when the intellect does not move, that is called the highest state.'
 11. 'This, the firm holding back of the senses, is what is called Yoga. He must be free from thoughtlessness then, for Yoga comes and goes.'
 12. 'He (the Self) cannot be reached by speech, by mind, or by the eye. How can it be apprehended except by him who says: "He is?"'
 13. 'By the words "He is," is he to be apprehended, and by (admitting) the reality of both (the invisible Brahman and the visible world, as coming from Brahman). When he has been apprehended by the words "He is," then his reality reveals itself'
 14. 'When all desires that dwell in his heart cease, then the mortal becomes immortal, and obtains Brahman.'
 15. 'When all the ties of the heart are severed here on earth, then the mortal becomes immortal--here ends the teaching.'
 16. 'There are a hundred and one arteries of the heart, one of them penetrates the crown of the head. Moving upwards by it, a man (at his death) reaches the Immortal; the other arteries serve for departing in different directions.'
 17. 'The Person not larger than a thumb, the inner Self, is always settled in the heart of men. Let a man draw that Self forth from his body with steadiness,
as one draws the pith from a reed. Let him know that Self as the Bright, as the Immortal; yes, as the Bright, as the Immortal.'
1. Having received this knowledge taught by Death and the whole rule of Yoga (meditation), Nâkiketa became free from passion and death, and obtained Brahman. Thus it will be with another also who knows thus what relates to the Self.

2. May He protect us both! May He enjoy us both! May we acquire Strength together! May our knowledge become bright! May we never quarrel! Om! Peace! peace! peace! Harih, Om!