



A story first mentioned in the R̥g-Veda, this Upaniṣad is of the later Veda. Its chronology contentious, scholars date it to between 800-400 BC. The first chapter tells of a youth Naciketa's meeting with Yama, god of death. A play on words, Naciketa could be from several things:

- Na kṣiti | “non-decay, or what does not decay” (Deussen)
- Na jiti | “that which cannot be vanquished” (Deussen)
- Na ciketa | “the one who does not know” (Whitney, Deussen)

1.1.1 - 1.1.6 With his father about to perform an unfitting sacrifice of unhealthy cows (निरिन्द्रियाः), Naciketa volunteers himself for the sacrifice three times. On the third, he is sent to Yama by his father in rage.

1.1.7 - 1.1.9 Naciketa is neglected for three days and nights in Yama's house, as he is away (perhaps playing chess?). Having neglected a Brāhmaṇa guest to his home, Yama makes obsequence to Naciketa (नमस्तेऽस्तु ब्रह्मन्) and offers him three boons.

1.1.10 - 1.1.19 By Naciketa's first wish, his father's anger is to be gone and he should recognize him upon his return. With the second, to know that heavenly fire (अग्निं स्वर्ग्यम्) by which those in heaven share in immortality (स्वर्गलोका अमृतत्वं भजन्तः). Yama reveals this as leading to the endless world (अनन्तलोकासिम्), as a foundation (प्रतिष्ठा), and resting in the secret cave (गुहायाम्, as a metaphor for the heart). This establishes the ritual of the “triple Naciketa fire sacrifice,” which involves three symbolic fires.

1.1.20 - 1.1.29 The third wish is to know what becomes of those who depart (even from the heaven realm). Yama resists by tempting him with all earthly gains. Passing this test, Yama agrees to reveal his deepest secret, which even the ancient gods had doubt on (देवैरापि विचिकित्सितं पुरा) for it is not easy to understand (न हि सुविज्ञेयम्).

1.2.1 - 1.2.11 Yama praises him for choosing the good (श्रेयस्) over the pleasant (प्रेयस्).



1.2.12 - 1.2.13 And says: the obscured (दुर्दर्शम्) hidden (गूढम्) foundational (अनुप्रविष्टम्) ancient one (पुराणम्) in the secret place (गुहाहितम्, “heart”) is to be gone to by adhyātmayoga, a yoga of the higher self (अध्यात्मयोग, “yoking of the higher self”).

1.2.14 - 1.2.17 Naciketa then asks about that which is beyond right (धर्मात्) and wrong (अधर्मात्), done and not done (कृताकृतात्), what's been and is to become (भूताच्च भव्याच्च). Yama replies, “that is aum”, (ॐ इत्येतत्), for the syllable is Brahman (एतद्ध्येवाक्षरं ब्रह्म), the supreme (एतद्ध्येवाक्षरं परम्), and the best of foundations (एतदालम्बनं श्रेष्ठम्).

1.2.18 - 1.2.20 The verses 18 and 19 are almost exactly those in the Bhagavad Gītā 2.20 and 2.19, which state that the ātman is unborn and eternal. Then 1.2.20 states that it is smaller than the small, greater than the great.

1.2.21 - 1.2.24 The Self is said to be simultaneously opposite characteristics (sitting and moving) to show how the Whole evades empirical observation and categorization. The Self is revealed to those it chooses, who must have proper moral preparation.

1.3.1 - 1.3.2 Yama says: “two drink from having moved in a fitting manner in the world of good deeds (ऋतं पिबन्तौ सुकृतस्य लोके); both are lodged in the secret place [of the heart] in the remotest other half. The wise say they are light/heat (तपस्) and shadow (छाय).” Besides the clear psychoanalytical meaning, S. Radhakrishnan suggests that the presence of the highest in the heart is the point of contact in meditation.

1.3.3 - 1.3.9 The parable of the chariot (very similar to Plato's Phaedrus).

1.3.10 - 1.3.11 An ordering is established, of what is beyond what:

senses < objects < mind < discernment < the great Self (आत्मा महान्)

< the unmanifest (अव्यक्तम् = प्रकृति) < the cosmic consciousness (पुरुष)

1.3.12 - 1.3.16 The ordering hints at the later Sāṃkhya philosophy with its dualistic tension, yet is explicitly monistic with पुरुष > अव्यक्तम्. The hidden Self is said to be seen by those with restraint. Finally, “arise, awake and walk the difficult path”.

