

[NACIKETAS.] 20 There is this doubt about a man who is dead.  
 'He exists,' say some; others, 'He exists not.'  
 I want to know this, so please teach me.  
 This is the third of my three wishes.

[DEATH.] 21 As to this even the gods of old had doubts,  
 for it's hard to understand, it's a subtle doctrine.  
 Make, Naciketas, another wish.  
 Do not press me! Release me from this.

[NACIKETAS.] 22 As to this, we're told, even the gods had doubts;  
 and you say, O Death, it's hard to understand.  
 But another like you I can't find to explain it;  
 and there's no other wish that is equal to it.

[DEATH.] 23 Choose sons and grandsons who'd live a hundred years!  
 Plenty of livestock and elephants, horses and gold!  
 Choose as your domain a wide expanse of earth!  
 And you yourself live as many autumns as you wish!

24 And if you would think this is an equal wish—  
 You may choose wealth together with a long life;  
 Achieve prominence, Naciketas, in this wide world;  
 And I will make you enjoy your desires at will.

25 You may ask freely for all those desires,  
 hard to obtain in this mortal world;  
 Look at these lovely girls, with chariots and lutes,  
 girls of this sort are unobtainable by men—  
 I'll give them to you; you'll have them wait on you;  
 but about death don't ask me, Naciketas.

[NACIKETAS.] 26 Since the passing days of a mortal, O Death,  
 sap here the energy of all the senses;  
 And even a full life is but a trifle;  
 so keep your horses, your songs and dances!

27 With wealth you cannot make a man content;  
 Will we get to keep wealth, when we have seen you?

And we get to live only as long as you will allow!  
 So, this alone is the wish that I'd like to choose.

28 What mortal man with insight,  
 who has met those that do not die or grow old,  
 himself growing old in this wretched and lowly place,  
 looking at its beauties, its pleasures and joys,  
 would delight in a long life?

29 The point on which they have great doubts—  
 what happens at that great transit—  
 tell me that, O Death!  
 This is my wish, probing the mystery deep.  
 Naciketas wishes for nothing  
 other than that.

## CHAPTER 2

[DEATH.] 1 The good is one thing, the gratifying is quite another;  
 their goals are different, both bind a man.  
 Good things await him who picks the good;  
 by choosing the gratifying, one misses one's goal.

2 Both the good and the gratifying  
 present themselves to a man;  
 The wise assess them, note their difference;  
 and choose the good over the gratifying;  
 But the fool chooses the gratifying  
 rather than what is beneficial.

3 You have looked at and rejected, Naciketas,  
 things people desire, lovely and lovely to look at;  
 This disk of gold, where many a man founders,  
 you have not accepted as a thing of wealth.

4 Far apart and widely different are these two:  
 ignorance and what's known as knowledge.  
 I take Naciketas as one yearning for knowledge;  
 the many desires do not confound you.

5 Wallowing in ignorance, but calling themselves wise,  
 thinking themselves learned, the fools go around,  
 staggering about like a group of blind men,  
 led by a man who is himself blind.

- 6 This transit lies hidden from a careless fool,  
who is deluded by the delusion of wealth.  
Thinking 'This is the world; there is no other',  
he falls into my power again and again.
- 7 Many do not get to hear of that transit;  
and even when they hear,  
many don't comprehend it.  
Rare is the man who teaches it,  
lucky is the man who grasps it;  
Rare is the man who knows it,  
lucky is the man who's taught it.
- 8 Though one may think a lot, it is difficult to grasp,  
when it is taught by an inferior man.  
Yet one cannot gain access to it,  
unless someone else teaches it.  
For it is smaller than the size of an atom,  
a thing beyond the realm of reason.
- 9 One can't grasp this notion by argumentation;  
Yet it's easy to grasp when taught by another.  
You're truly steadfast, dear boy,  
you have grasped it!  
Would that we have, Naciketas,  
one like you to question us!
- 10 What you call a treasure, I know to be transient;  
for by fleeting things one cannot gain the perennial.  
Therefore I have built the fire-altar of Naciketas,  
and by fleeting things I have gained the eternal.
- 11 Satisfying desires is the foundation of the world;  
Uninterrupted rites bring ultimate security;  
Great and widespread praise is the foundation—  
These you have seen, wise Naciketas,  
And having seen, firmly rejected.
- 12 The primeval one who is hard to perceive,  
wrapped in mystery, hidden in the cave,  
residing within th'impenetrable depth—  
Regarding him as god, an insight  
gained by inner contemplation,  
both sorrow and joy the wise abandon.
- 13 When a mortal has heard it, understood it;  
when he has drawn it out,  
and grasped this subtle point of doctrine;

He rejoices, for he has found  
something in which he could rejoice.  
To him I consider my house  
to be open Naciketas.

[NACIKETAS?] 14 Tell me what you see as—  
Different from the right doctrine and from the wrong;  
Different from what's done here and what's left undone;  
Different from what has been and what's yet to be.'

[DEATH?] 15 The word that all the Vedas disclose;  
The word that all austerities proclaim;  
Seeking which people live student lives;  
That word now I will tell you in brief—  
It is OM!

16 For this alone is the syllable that's *brahman*!  
For this alone is the syllable that's supreme!  
When, indeed, one knows this syllable,  
he obtains his every wish.

17 This is the support that's best!  
This is the support supreme!  
And when one knows this support,  
he rejoices in *brahman*'s world.

[DEATH] 18 The wise one—  
he is not born, he does not die;  
he has not come from anywhere;  
he has not become anyone.  
He is unborn and eternal, primeval and everlasting.  
And he is not killed, when the body is killed.

[The dialogue between Naciketas and Death ends here.]

19 If the killer thinks that he kills;  
If the killed thinks that he is killed;  
Both of them fail to understand.  
He neither kills, nor is he killed.

20 Finer than the finest, larger than the largest,  
is the self (*āman*) that lies here hidden  
in the heart of a living being.  
Without desires and free from sorrow,  
a man perceives by the creator's grace  
the grandeur of the self.

21 Sitting down, he roams afar.  
Lying down, he goes everywhere.

- The god ceaselessly exulting—  
Who, besides me, is able to know?
- 22 When he perceives this immense, all-pervading self,  
as bodiless within bodies,  
as stable within unstable beings—  
A wise man ceases to grieve.
- 23 This self cannot be grasped,  
by teachings or by intelligence,  
or even by great learning.  
Only the man he chooses can grasp him,  
whose body this self chooses as his own.
- 24 Not a man who has not quit his evil ways;  
Nor a man who is not calm or composed;  
Nor even a man who is without a tranquil mind;  
Could ever secure it by his mere wit.
- 25 For whom the Brahmin and the Kṣatriya  
are both like a dish of boiled rice;  
and death is like the sprinkled sauce;  
Who truly knows where he is?

## CHAPTER 3

- Knowers of *brahman*, men with five fires,  
and with the three fire-altars of Naciketas,  
They call these two 'Shadow' and 'Light',  
the two who have entered—  
the one into the cave of the heart,  
the other into the highest region beyond,  
both drinking the truth  
in the world of rites rightly performed.
- 2 May we master the fire-altar of Naciketas,  
a dike  
for those who have sacrificed;  
the imperishable, the highest *brahman*,  
the farther shore  
for those who wish to cross the danger.
- 3 Know the self as a rider in a chariot,  
and the body, as simply the chariot.

- Know the intellect as the charioteer,  
and the mind, as simply the reins.
- 4 The senses, they say, are the horses,  
and sense objects are the paths around them;  
He who is linked to the body (*āman*), senses, and mind,  
the wise proclaim as the one who enjoys.
- 5 When a man lacks understanding,  
and his mind is never controlled;  
His senses do not obey him,  
as bad horses, a charioteer.
- 6 But when a man has understanding,  
and his mind is ever controlled;  
His senses do obey him,  
as good horses, a charioteer.
- 7 When a man lacks understanding,  
is unmindful and always impure;  
He does not reach that final step,  
but gets on the round of rebirth.
- 8 But when a man has understanding,  
is mindful and always pure;  
He does reach that final step,  
from which he is not reborn again.
- 9 When a man's mind is his reins,  
intellect, his charioteer;  
He reaches the end of the road,  
that highest step of Viṣṇu.
- 10 Higher than the senses are their objects;  
Higher than sense objects is the mind;  
Higher than the mind is the intellect;  
Higher than the intellect is the immense self;
- 11 Higher than the immense self is the unmanifest;  
Higher than the unmanifest is the person;  
Higher than the person there's nothing at all.  
That is the goal, that's the highest state.
- 12 Hidden in all the beings,  
this self is not visibly displayed.  
Yet, people of keen vision see him,  
with eminent and sharp minds.
- 13 A wise man should curb his speech and mind,  
control them within th'intelligent self;

He should control intelligence within the immense self,  
and the latter, within the tranquil self.

- <sup>14</sup> Arise! Awake! Pay attention,  
when you've obtained your wishes!  
A razor's sharp edge is hard to cross—  
that, poets say, is the difficulty of the path.

- <sup>15</sup> It has no sound or touch,  
no appearance, taste, or smell;  
It is without beginning or end,  
undecaying and eternal;  
When a man perceives it,  
fixed and beyond the immense,  
He is freed from the jaws of death.

- <sup>16</sup> The wise man who hears or tells  
the tale of Naciketas,  
an ancient tale told by Death,  
will rejoice in *brahman's* world.

- <sup>17</sup> If a man, pure and devout, proclaims this great secret  
in a gathering of Brahmins,  
or during a meal for the dead,  
it will lead him to eternal life!

## CHAPTER 4

The Self-existent One pierced the apertures outward,  
therefore, one looks out, and not into oneself.  
A certain wise man in search of immortality,  
turned his sight inward and saw the self within.

- <sup>2</sup> Fools pursue outward desires,  
and enter the trap of death spread wide.  
But the wise know what constitutes th'immortal,  
and in unstable things here do not seek the stable.

- <sup>3</sup> Appearance and taste, smell and sounds,  
touches and sexual acts—  
That by which one experiences these,  
by the same one understands—  
what then is here left behind?

So, indeed, is that!

- <sup>4</sup> That by which one perceives both  
the states of sleep and of being awake;  
Knowing that it's th'immense, all-pervading self,  
a wise man does not grieve.

- <sup>5</sup> When a man perceives close at hand  
this living, honey-eating self,  
The lord of what was and what will be—  
it does not seek to hide from him.

So, indeed, is that!

- <sup>6</sup> He who was born before heat,  
who before the waters was born,  
who has seen through living beings—  
Entering the cave of the heart,  
[one sees] him abiding there.

So, indeed, is that!

- <sup>7</sup> She who comes into being with breath,  
Aditi, who embodies divinity,  
who was born through living beings—  
Entering the cave of the heart,  
[one sees] her abiding there.

So, indeed, is that!

- <sup>8</sup> Jātavedas is hidden within the two fire-drills,  
fostered, as a fetus by women with child;  
With offering should men as they awake,  
worship the fire each and every day.

So, indeed, is that!

- <sup>9</sup> From which the sun rises,  
and into which it sets;  
In it are fixed all the gods;  
beyond it no one can ever pass.

So, indeed, is that!

- <sup>10</sup> Whatever is down here, the same is over there;  
and what is over there is replicated down here.  
From death to death he goes, who sees  
here any kind of diversity.

## MUNḌAKA 1

1

Brahmā arose as the first among gods,  
 as the creator of all,  
 as the guardian of the world.  
 To Atharvan, his firstborn son, he disclosed  
 the knowledge of *brahman*,  
 of all knowledge the root.

<sup>2</sup> The knowledge of *brahman*,  
 which Brahmā taught him—  
 both the higher and the lower—  
 Atharvan of old disclosed to Aṅgir,  
 Aṅgir, to Bhāradvāja Satyavāha,  
 Bhāradvāja, to Aṅgiras.

<sup>3</sup> Śaunaka, a wealthy householder, once went up to Aṅgiras in the prescribed manner and asked: "What is it, my lord, by knowing which a man comes to know this whole world?" <sup>4</sup> This is what Aṅgiras told him.

Two types of knowledge a man should learn—those who know *brahman* tell us—the higher and the lower. <sup>5</sup> The lower of the two consists of the Ṛg-veda, the Yajurveda, the Sāmaveda, the Atharvaveda, phonetics, the ritual science, grammar, etymology, metrics, and astronomy; whereas the higher is that by which one grasps the imperishable.

<sup>6</sup> What cannot be seen, what cannot be grasped,  
 without color, without sight or hearing,  
 without hands or feet;  
 What is eternal and all-pervading,  
 extremely minute, present everywhere—  
 That is the immutable,  
 which the wise fully perceive.



<sup>7</sup> As a spider spins out threads, then draws them into itself;  
 As plants sprout out from the earth;  
 As head and body hair grows from a living man;  
 So from the imperishable all things here spring.

[Ritualists argue:]

<sup>8</sup> Through heat *brahman* is built up;  
 thereby food is produced.

From food comes breath,  
mind, truth, and worlds,  
and immortality in rites.

- <sup>9</sup> He is omniscient, he knows all;  
knowledge is his austerity.  
From him is born this *brahman*,  
as also name, appearance, and food.

## 2 Here is the truth:

The rites that the wise poets  
saw in the vedic formulas,  
are stretched in many ways  
across the three Vedas—  
Perform them always,  
you who long for the truth;  
That's your path to the world of those  
Who correctly perform the rites.

- <sup>2</sup> When the flame flickers after the fire is lit,  
let him then make his offerings,  
between the two pourings of ghee.

- <sup>3</sup> A man's daily fire sacrifice that remains  
without the new-moon, the full-moon,  
the four-month or harvest sacrifice;  
or without offerings to guests;  
That is not performed, or performed  
without an offering to all the gods,  
or without following the rules;  
Will rob him of his worlds, up to the very seventh.

- <sup>4</sup> The Black, the Terrible, the Swift-as-the-mind,  
The Blood-red, the Smoke-colored, the Sparkling,  
And the glittering Goddess—  
These are the seven flickering tongues of flame.

- <sup>5</sup> When a man moves within these,  
as they are shining bright,  
receiving oblations offered at the proper time;  
Then, as sunbeams, these carry him  
to where the king of gods resides,  
the only place to reside.

- <sup>6</sup> "Come! Come!" say the oblations shining bright,  
As they carry their offerer on the sun's rays of light,



They praise him, telling him flattering things:  
 "This is yours, this *brahman*'s world,  
 Built by good deeds and rites well done."

[The Author replies:]

- 7 Surely, they are floating unanchored,  
 these eighteen forms of the sacrifice,  
 the rites within which are called inferior.  
 The fools who hail that as the best,  
 return once more to old age and death.
- 8 Wallowing in ignorance, but calling themselves wise,  
 thinking they are learned, the fools go around,  
 Hurting themselves badly, like a group of blind men,  
 led by a man who is himself blind.
- 9 Wallowing in ignorance time and again,  
 the fools imagine, "We have reached our aim!"  
 Because of their passion, they do not understand,  
 these people who are given to rites.  
 Therefore, they fall, wretched and forlorn,  
 when their heavenly stay comes to a close.
- 10 Deeming sacrifices and gifts as the best,  
 the imbeciles know nothing better.  
 When they have enjoyed their good work,  
 atop the firmament,  
 They return again to this abject world.
- 11 But those in the wilderness, calm and wise,  
 who live a life of penance and faith,  
 as they beg their food;  
 Through the sun's door they go, spotless,  
 to where that immortal Person is,  
 that immutable self.
- 12 When he perceives the worlds as built with rites,  
 A Brahmin should acquire a sense of disgust—  
 "What's made  
 can't make  
 what is unmade!"  
 To understand it he must go, firewood in hand,  
 to a teacher well versed in the Vedas,  
 and focused on *brahman*.
- 13 To that student of tranquil mind and calm disposition,  
 who had come to him in the right manner,  
 that learned man faithfully imparted,

The knowledge of *brahman*,  
by which he understood that Person—  
the true, the imperishable.

## MUṆḌAKA 2

1 Here is the truth:

As from a well-stoked fire sparks fly by the thousands,  
all looking just like it,  
So from the imperishable issue diverse things,  
and into it, my friend, they return.

2 That Person, indeed, is divine,  
he has no visible form;  
He is both within and without,  
unborn, without breath or mind;  
He is radiant, and farther than  
the farthest imperishable.

3 From him issue breath and mind,  
and all the organs,  
wind, fire, water, and space,  
And the earth that bears everything.

4 His head is the fire, his eyes the sun and moon;  
His ears are the quarters; his speech the Vedas disclosed;  
His breath is the wind, his heart the universe;  
and with his feet he is, indeed,  
the inmost self of every being.

5 From him comes the fire whose firewood is the sun;  
From the moon comes rain; plants grow upon earth;  
And in the woman the man spills his seed—  
From the Person have issued many creatures.

6 R̥g verses, Sāman chants, Yajus formulas,  
As well as sacrificial consecrations:  
from him do they spring;  
All sacrifices, rites, sacrificial gifts:  
from him do they spring;  
The year, the sacrificer, and the worlds—  
Worlds where the sun and the moon shine—  
from him do they spring.