

HSC Mandir Lecture Series: The Kathopaniṣad and Spirituality

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I. What are the Upaniṣads?

The Upaniṣads (उपनिषद्) are a collection of *Vedānta* (वेदांत) scriptures, a part of Hindu canon that occurs at the end of Vedic scripture. There are about 200+ different Upaniṣads, but only about a dozen are considered to be मुख्य (mukhya), or important. The subject material typically concerns the metaphysical and less concrete aspects of Hindu philosophy. Topics and terms often discussed in the Upaniṣads include the Ultimate Reality, ब्राह्मन् (Brāhmaṇ), आत्मन् (Ātmaṇ), and the importance of faith. Below is a timeline of well-known Hindu scripture:

ऋग्वेद (R̥gveda) - 1500-1100 BCE

सामवेद (Sāmaveda) - 1500-500 BCE

यजुर्वेद (Yajurveda) - 1500-500 BCE

अथर्ववेद (Atharvaveda) - 1500-500 BCE

उपनिषद (Upaniṣads) - 1200-500 BCE

महाभारत (Mahabhaṛata) - 400 BCE - 400 CE

भगवद्गीत (Bhagavad Gīta) - 400 BCE - 300 CE

रामायण (Rāmāyaṇa) - 400 BCE - 400 CE

Source: Wikipedia - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Hindu_texts

An important part of Hindu scripture to remember is that because it is chronological, the material of any given part of scripture exists in relation to the others. The R̥gveda, for example, concerns creation and the cosmology of the Hindu conception of the universe, and therefore establishes the foundation for discussions found in later texts. That said, the material of the Upaniṣads, as you will find in the Kathopaniṣad, can seem contradictory of previous established ideas, and may in fact be so. Whether new ideas contradict, coexist with, or replace previous ideas is dependent on the reader. Intellectual freedom and discussion are key tenets of Hindu scripture, and this will allow you to understand scripture more thoroughly.

For your benefit, here are some of the defining principles of Hindu cosmology that will be relevant to the discussion of the Upaniṣads:

All living beings have souls that are reincarnated in a cycle of death and rebirth, known as *samsāra*. Liberation from this cycle is known as मोक्ष (mokṣa), or spiritual liberation. This is the ultimate goal of the Hindu: to be free from संसारा (samsāra) and achieve निर्वाण (nirvāṇa), and thereby be joined with God. This freedom is established by a detachment from earthly desire, and fulfilling one's धर्म (dharma), or personal calling, according to a code of ethics and morality. The

cycle of *samsāra* is also partially dictated by a cosmic principle known as कर्म (*karma*), which is the sum of all deeds, good and bad, accumulated over many lifetimes. By balancing the two, such that one's good and bad *karma* are equal, one can attain liberation.

II. The कठोपनिषद् (Kaṭhopaniṣad): The Story

Translation and text used as reference: http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/katha1/Commentary_on_Katha_Upanishad.pdf (note: the commentary was not referenced in the making of this handout)

Characters:

नचिकेतस् (Naciketas) = in search of spiritual knowledge, the unperceived, inspiring a search for the spiritual

वाजश्रव (Vājaśrava) = famous for donations (real name is औद्दलकि - Auddalaki)

यम(राज) (Yama(rāja)) = the Lord of Death (a form of Lord शिव (Śiva), the Destroyer)

Naciketas, a young Brahmin boy, is concerned for his father's spiritual well-being, since his father gives away barren and used cows as donations to the gods and is only concerned with the rewards of doing so. Naciketas asks his father three times: "Unto whom will you give me?" In anger, Vājaśrava declares that he will offer Naciketas to Yama, the Lord of Death.

Naciketas is horrified and saddened, but resolves to comply with his father's wishes, and travels to meet Yama. When Naciketas arrives in the Abode of Death, Yama is absent, and Naciketas waits for three days before Yama returns, without food or water. It is said that bad luck befalls anyone, even a *dēva*, who neglects to take care of their guests, especially a Brahmin. When Yama returns, he is embarrassed and begs forgiveness, granting Naciketas three boons as penance.

Naciketas' first boon is that he be able to return to the world of the living to his father, pacified and free of anger. Yama readily grants this. Naciketas then asks Yama to teach him the यज्ञ (yajña), or ritual, that allows one to attain immortality and reach heaven, where no one fears death, old age, or want of food or water. Yama instructs Naciketas in the ritual, and names the ritual after him. By performing this ritual three times, after uniting with the three: one's parents and one's teacher, as well as performing the three duties: study (अध्यायन - *adhyāyana*), ritual (यज्ञ - *yajña*), and charity (दत्त - *datta*), one shall attain the fire of Brāhmaṇa. Through understanding these three "fires" that comprise the sacred fire, one shall overcome sorrow, and attain heaven.

Yama then asks for Naciketas' third boon. Naciketas asks the Lord of Death: "Teach me what lies beyond death. What becomes of oneself when they depart from this world?"

Yama tells him: “O Naciketas, I beg of you, ask of me another boon. This mystery has eluded even the gods, for it is subtle and difficult to comprehend. Ask for herds of cattle, for mountains of gold, for long lived sons and grandsons, for the entire earth and to live as long as you wish. I shall make you a king, the enjoyer of all desires, anything but this boon you have asked of me! Whatever pleasures of heaven which you desire, I shall grant, but do not ask about the Soul after death.”

But Naciketas replies: “O Yama, these things are but ephemeral and wear out one’s senses. Wealth does not confer bliss, and when I have seen the undying and divine, how can I wish for anything but the knowledge of the hereafter? I cannot ask of you any other boon.”

And so Yama, moved by Naciketas’ faith and sincerity, divulged to him the आत्म विद्या (*ātmā-vidyā*), or self-knowledge. We choose between the good (श्रेयश - *śreyas*) and the pleasant (प्रेयश - *preyas*), which differ in their outcomes. The pleasant shall sate worldly wants, but only the wise will choose the good over the pleasant. In renouncing worldly desires, such as lineage, wealth, and power, Naciketas attained greater knowledge, which is a higher purpose. Yama said that those who walk the ways of wealth will always remain under his sway, and only by freedom from ignorance are they liberated. Only by learning to comprehend the Ātman, the Self, do we find freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth.

This knowledge can only be attained through study under an able teacher, who is versed in the subtlety of Brāhmaṇa themselves. It is not attained through argument, but rather reason. Under the guidance of the right teacher, reason, the highest faculty granted to us, allows us to ascertain the highest truths of this world and the next.

III. Interpreting and Understanding the Story

Now, one might wonder this: do Naciketas’ second and third boons not contradict one another? The second boon gives him knowledge of the ritual to attain heaven, which is exactly what Naciketas was concerned about with respect to his father’s obsession with heavenly rewards.

Heaven and liberation are not the same thing, as heaven is also known as the abode of the *dēvas*. But even this is not true liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. The ritual is meant not simply to attain heaven, but rather to focus our energies on freeing ourselves from vices such as ignorance, irreverence (or faithlessness), and greed. It is but a step in the process. Yama goes on to explain that the ritual is the “refuge for those who wish to cross the ocean of *samsāra*” (I.3.2). It is a method by which we concentrate our energies and efforts, but not by which the Self is attained. That is only attained through the realization, under the guidance of a teacher, that the Self is imperishable, but is “bodiless, seated firmly in perishable bodies” (I.2.22). The ritual is a psychological focus of faith, but only through study under a teacher can the *ātmā-vidyā* be learned.

Yet Yama specifically states that the *ātmā-vidyā* “cannot be attained by study of the *vedas*, nor by intelligence, nor by much hearing” (I.2.23). This is to say that one cannot attain *ātmā-vidyā* through simple intelligence, which is differentiated from reason. Reason is the faculty by which we understand the contents of knowledge divulged unto us, whereas intelligence is simply knowing things, not necessarily understanding it.

But Yama has another caveat: “But he who has not turned away from bad conduct, whose senses are not subdued, whose mind is not concentrated, whose mind is not pacified, can never obtain this Ātman by knowledge.” (I.2.24)

In this verse, there is a subtle reference to what is known as the parable of the chariot (also known as *rथ कल्पन* (*ratha kalpana*)):

“Know the Ātman as the Lord of the chariot, the body as the chariot; know the intellect as the charioteer and the mind again as the reins. They say, the senses are the horses and their objects are the roads; the Ātman, the senses and the mind united, the wise call the enjoyer. He who has no discrimination and whose mind is always uncontrolled, his senses are not controllable like vicious horses of a driver. But he who has understanding and whose mind is always controlled, his senses are under control like good horses of a driver.” (I.3.3-7)



Through this parable we understand that it is only through the control of the senses and application of intelligence (the use of reason) that we can comprehend the Self. To “subdue” the senses is to gain control over one’s mind and sensory faculties, and use those abilities intelligently. We cannot attain this liberation, this realization of the Self, without freeing ourselves from prejudice, pain, sickness, delusion, anger, or whatever other pestilences that plague the world, and infect our senses.

Now, what is the ultimate answer to Naciketas' question: What happens to the Soul upon death? Yama explains that the Soul is imperishable, and an extension of the Universal Ātman, or Brāhman. The Soul is reincarnated over and over again, until one realizes this truth: that the soul is an extension of the Ultimate Reality, which is Brāhman. Upon this realization, it is said that we experience bliss or peace, and freedom from worldly misery.

Brāhman, upon division and entering the world, inhabits different shapes and forms, establishing a fundamental commonality in all beings. We are rivers and tributaries that issue from the same source, and ultimately return to the same vast ocean that is Brāhman. Yet it also speaks to the differences that we cannot ignore, for rivers may flow parallel yet play different roles in their various localities, and acquire different meanings as a result.

In the end, the Kaṭhopaniṣad is a story of self-discovery. It establishes the need for a spiritual exploration of both the world and the self, that simply ritual and factual knowledge of the universe is not enough to be free of suffering. Whether spirituality concerns religion or not is a different matter. Spiritual nourishment is essential to the soul, and simply going through the motions of life are insufficient, and for some, entirely unnecessary. Through devotion to art, God, or one's craft, we can find purpose and fulfillment of our spirit.

Here are some questions to ponder:

1. What does “spirituality” mean to you?
2. What is the importance of *yajña* in Hinduism or in any religion?
3. How is “reaching heaven” and “attaining immortality” different from *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation)?
4. Does death’s portrayal in this story surprise you? In what ways?
5. What is the significance of the use of “fire” as a concept? Is it literal, or figurative?
6. What’s an example of the good versus the pleasant?
7. Is self-knowledge important to you?