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# UNIT 1 KATHA UPANISHAD

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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Katha Upanishad is the very popular Upanishad. It is the most beautiful Upanishad that answers the basic questions of end of human life. By the end of this unit, you are expected to know:

- the question of the meaning of life and death
- the question of immortality
- the question of the meaning of *dharma* and *adharma*,
- the question of knowledge and ignorance
- the question of the ultimate cause of the world

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Katha Upanishad belongs to Krishna Yajurveda. Scholars are of the view that in the elevation of profound thoughts, depth of expressions and the beauty of imagery, no Upanishad is equal to Katha Upanishad. It is acclaimed as the clearest and the most popular one for its brevity and perfect enunciation for the mystical truths about life. Basic questions of life and death, meaning of various things in life are dealt in the Katha Upanishad. Katha holds a special fascination for all students of the Upanishads for its happy blend of charming poetry, deep mysticism, and profound philosophy. It contains a more unified exposition of Vedanta than any other single Upanishad. Its charm is heightened by the two characters of its dialogue, namely, old Yama, the teacher, and young Nachiketas, the student. The Upanishad is structured as dialogue between Lord Yama, the teacher and Nachiketas, a serious, honest and motivated student. The student is portrayed as one who has an understanding of the eternal and ephemeral in full measure. He

is presented as a young son of Vajasrava and of 12 years old. This boy is very devoted to his father and society. He has a strong desire and quest for Self-knowledge. When he meets Lord Yama he is granted three boons. The little boy asked for firstly, pacification of his father, secondly a fire ritual to gain *swarga*, heaven, thirdly, knowledge of the Self. Katha Upanishad contains one hundred and twenty verses divided into two chapters. Each of the chapters has three sections, called *vallis*.

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## 1.2 STORY OF NACHIKETAS

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Vajashrava, father of Nachiketas performs a sacrifice to merit certain rewards. At the end of the performance of *visvajit* sacrifice, he distributes gifts of old and feeble cows to the pious people as *dakshina*. In such a one-day sacrifice the performer is expected to give all his possessions as gift to the priests who participate in the sacrifice. Young boy Nachiketas is greatly disturbed by the act of his father and comes forward to offer himself as a gift to the priest. The father gets irritated by his sons' offer and lashes out in anger that he would give his son to Yama, the god of Death. At the utterance of these words, father is filled with great sorrow. But to keep up his father's words, Nachiketas bows to him and walks away into the abode of Yama. There he waits for Yama for three days and nights without a morsel of food to eat or a drop of water to drink. On his return Yama is greatly distressed at the plight of the young boy and is pleased with the stern attitude of the boy. He offers the boy three boons. Even though young in age, Nachiketas is full of wisdom. The first boon that he asked is regarding his father that he be free from anxiety, anger and be granted calmness in mind. As for the second boon, he asked to enlighten him about the sacrifices that lead one to heaven and free people from hunger, thirst, fear and sorrow. Yama readily grants this boon with further instructions. He explains how the sacrificial fire becomes the source of the worlds. To which Nachiketas gives all the details and procedures of this sacrifice without any fault. Pleased with the shrewdness, power of memory and performance of the boy, Yama grants, "henceforth, this sacrificial fire would be known by your name." And it is granted that whoever kindles that fire thrice, would become united with the three lords and attains liberation.

The third boon Nachiketas asks for is to enlighten him as to what happens to a person after his death. He asks, "There is a doubt about a person after death. Some say he exists and others say he does not." Yama asserts that even great ones have this doubt and the answer to this question being highly complicated and very subtle is very difficult to comprehend. By saying this Yama tried to dissuade the boy from entertaining such query and asked him to ask for any other material boon like wealth, gold, horses, elephants, land and so on. Nachiketas remains unmoved and uncompromising on getting answer to the question. He did not want any other material gifts from the Lord except the mysterious knowledge about after life. Knowing the temporary nature of worldly gains he insists on receiving the eternal knowledge. Greatly impressed by Nachiketas as beyond all pleasures and aspirations of material world, Lord Yama starts the instruction on knowledge of the eternal. Ignorance and Knowledge are wide apart as they lead to different goals. To know the truth one follows the path of knowledge which is explained well by the teachings of Katha Upanishad.

### 1.3 NATURE OF THE SELF

The nature of the Self is that it is unborn, eternal, everlasting, ancient and not destroyed. There is no birth and death for the intelligent Self. It is all pervading, far, near and everywhere. It is joyful as well as joyless. It is bodiless and all pervading. It is smaller than the smallest; at the same time it is greater than the greatest. The *purusa* is the subtlest. It is subtler than sensory objects, senses, mind, intellect and even *mahat*, the manifested *Hiranyagarbha* and the unmanifested *avyakta*. Self is hidden in all things. The Self is soundless, formless, imperishable, tasteless, odourless, eternal, constant, all pervading, subtlest, omniscient and omnipotent. Its light is greater than that of the Sun, Moon, Stars, lightning and fire. It is not seen but by its light everything shines. No mortal beings ever live by just life breath alone. One lives by the self over which the whole existence is dependent on. It is the Brahman that sustains everything and becomes the source of all. He is compared to the Peepul tree whose roots are above in the sky and the branches below. Every possible thing in all the worlds rest in it. Over which none can transcend. “Under his command, even the creator comes out vibrating within as the life-force. He is the one dispenser of the universal law of nature, and a great terror like a raised thunderbolt.” The power of the Self controls the fire, sun, air and even death. All the forces and gods discharge their respective duties by the order of the Self. The Purusa, the self is greater than everything else. He is the truth which everyone wants to know. He alone is the Sun, the air in the sky and fire on the sacrificial altar and the soma-juice at sacrifices. Yet His form is not within the field of vision. None is able to perceive with naked eye.

The self is consciousness. It is not the property of the body as matter is intrinsically insentient in nature. The self is also not a product of body as unconscious matter can never produce something conscious. It is not a part of the body too as it pervades all over the body. The self is a separate and independent entity different from the body in which it resides. It is the entity that pervades the entire body and makes it alive and vibrant. Every part of the body is dependent on it for their existence. While they are dependent on the Self, it is not dependent on them for its reality. It is not limited by the boundaries of the body. It alone survives even after the decay of the body.

#### Check Your Progress I

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Explain the three boons asked by Nachiketas.

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2) Describe the Nature of the Self.

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## 1.4 REALIZATION OF THE SELF

Only a person who has realized the Self can impart the knowledge of Self. Yama calls, “O man! Arise, awake and realize that truth.” The path to know the self is very difficult like a sharp edge of a razor. Hard indeed is such a path to tread. The difficulty lies in the discrimination of what is self and the non-self. What is in the manifest world is there in the unmanifest Brahman. An ordinary man fails to realize this truth and sees the world as different from Brahman. The sense organs by nature are external in nature. Eventually one who identifies with the body and the sense organs try only to understand and know the sense objects and the externals alone. They rejoice in the sense-objects and never get the vision of the self. These persons are like immature children in their thought and their pursuit. Only few wise men that are desirous of immortality turn their attention internally and have the quest of self-knowledge and self-realization.

## 1.5 MEANS OF REALIZATION

Knowledge of the Self cannot be obtained only through logical arguments. Knowledge is more than logical reasoning. It cannot be known by the scriptural knowledge or by mere human intelligence. It is possible only by internal realization and experience. Anyone with unrestrained mind becomes only impure and gets immersed in material pleasures. The senses are to be controlled by the mind and the mind is controlled by the self. Only that person who lives without any worldly desires becomes immortal. Realization is through concentration of mind and locating the Self in the inner most being of oneself. This self is the subtlest and is seated in the heart of all. The realization is very hard for everyone but the wise achieve it. One who is free from desires is able to see the Self and becomes free from any grief. As all longings disappear, the Self is attained. When all five senses are at rest together with the mind and the intellect becomes inactive, then one attains the highest state. One abandons joy and grief of the transient world. After knowing and grasping the Truth, one attains the subtle Self and rejoices. Knowledge of the self liberates everyone. The unintelligent goes after material objects and outward pleasures, falls prey to the cycle of death and life. The wise attain immortality by knowing the Self. Nachiketas questions Yama on the truth about the status of the Self after death. Yama says that some souls re-enter the womb to have a body. Those who are not liberated would get another birth. Some other unenlightened souls would get plants as their body. Determining factor for such rebirth is the karma.

Syllable AUM is the goal of all teachings of the Vedas and the austere activities. This is the ultimate one which becomes the final objective of all penance. AUM

is both empirical and absolute Brahman. Whoever knows the identity of the syllable AUM and the Self, Brahman, attains all that one desires. He would get beyond the realms of ignorance and knowledge, the cause and the effect and the rest.

This knowledge is obtained not by reasoning, thought, intuition or intellect, but only by entering into one's own heart. Looking within oneself and understanding the subtlest subject make liberation possible. Distinguishing what is not self from what is self, especially the body is very necessary for self realization. As one separates the stalk from a reed, one should do for separating self from the body. Yoga can be acquired as well as lost owing to the one's own effort and skill. The art of yoga is a firm control of senses by the mind. A yogi becomes free from wandering of the mind.

As the self reveals itself not to all, it is not attainable by all. It cannot be attained by a mere study of the scriptures and intellect. It is seen and experienced by the seekers of truth with their concentrated and pure mind. Those who have not refrained from bad conduct and those with unrestrained mind and those of unmeditative persons cannot get the glimpse of Self.

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## 1.6 INDIVIDUAL SELF AND COSMIC SELF

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In the world of spiritual realm, being is understood in two ways, individual self and the cosmic self. The cosmic self enters the intelligence and consciousness of the created beings and reside in the cavity of the heart. It enlivens the lives of all living beings. As Individual self it enjoys at the same time the results of the good and the bad actions of the human being. The self is omniscient which is never born or dead. It is not also created one. In decaying of the body, the self does not suffer. Self is the one that neither kills nor is it killed. Like air which pervades the whole world and assumes different forms according to the container it is filled in, the self abides in the hearts of all beings that appear to be different. The self is both transcendental and immanent. In its absolute state it is transcendental and it is immanent as it prevalent. There is no place where he is not. He is here within, without and everywhere.

The eternal Brahman resides in the city of eleven gates. The gates are described as follows: seven in the head, one in the navel, the two lower ones and one at the top of the head. Self presides over the physical body. An interesting analogy is made. The body is compared to a chariot which endlessly travels on the path of life. The soul is the master of the chariot in which the intellect acts as the charioteer, the mind as the bridle, sense organs as horses and the external objects as roads. The Self remains the enjoyer. If someone has an unrestrained mind and ignorance his sense organs become uncontrollable like unbridled horses. Controlled mind takes the chariot in a right path. With impure mind one finds difficult to attain the goal.

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## 1.7 RESULTS OF REALIZATION

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At the realization one does not grieve as ignorance is got rid off by meditation upon the self. The realized self does not grieve because he experiences the Self as the self-same and all pervading. It dwells in the hearts of all without any

physical attachment and is without any name or form. The wise realizes then truth that the self is distinct from the sense organs. They are only the product of the five basic elements of nature. Their existence and fields of activities are limited and changing. The self is entirely different from them as unlimited and unchanging. By beholding the self as “this is that” one fears not. Having been liberated, one becomes absolutely free from the web of births and deaths. At the purification of the mind when the self is realized, there is an end to the dualistic and pluralistic outer external world experiences that are limited, finite and binding. The people of awakening worship the omniscient fire in the fire stick. The fire is the very self all-pervading. Like a fetus well preserved inside, the fire is well lodged unseen in the stick. It is perceived only by the realized persons. One who knows this truth realizes the Atman as the sustainer of life and the lord of the past and the future. Thus what looks as unknown and unknowable for some becomes knowable by the intellect. The intellect which is able to cognize light taste, smell, sound, touch etc drives its knowing capability only the Self. There is nothing unknowable to this omniscient Supreme Being itself. The self of the realized remains pure like pure water poured on to pure water remains pure forever. The one who is able to understand and knows the Self becomes immortal. The person who perceives this truth and realizes that experience attains the state of Brahman even while living. He becomes a *jivan mukta*.

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## 1.8 JIVAN-MUKTI: REALIZATION WHILE LIVING

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Benefit of knowledge of the Self is presented in two forms in Upanishads. One is the benefit that can be obtained in this life itself while the other is the benefit after death. Katha Upanishad speaks of both the benefits namely, *Jivan mukti* and *videha mukti*. More than the benefits after death, like freedom from cycle of birth and death and immortality, benefits obtained while living in the body itself draw one’s attention for authentic meaningful living as human beings here on earth. *Jivan mukti* is the benefit of knowledge enjoyed mostly at the mental level in different ways. A sense of fulfillment in life is the first fruit of realization. The realized person is free from limitation and belongs to all. There is no sense of isolation or rejection as there is a realization of all-pervading Self within oneself. Secondly, one becomes independent mentally and emotionally. Nothing affects him emotionally in case of accumulation or deprivation of things, of relation or departure of people. The realized one is not dependent on external factors like wealth, status, persons, power, authority, glory, respect etc. Thirdly, the benefit of realization is the emotional balance or stability as a capacity to face anything in life. Whenever there is an emotional fluctuation nothing affects the Self.

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## 1.9 VIDEHA-MUKTI

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While *Jivan mukti* is liberation while living, *videha mukti* is freedom after death. Katha Upanishad clearly states about what happens to a person who is still in ignorance. After death these unrealized persons would drop only the body. Death becomes only a separation of the self with the physical body which is made out of five elements. To these five elements the body returns back. The other two bodies namely the subtle and causal bodies continue to exist for an *ajnani*, ignorant person. The subtle body seeks for another physical body to continue the journey.

Rebirth occurs in another body. Law of karma is operative in the rebirth process. As in every body the self experiences good and bad and acquires merits and demerits. These merits and demerits determine the rebirth to enjoy both bad and good fruits of previous birth. In ignorant persons, there remains lots of unfructified *punya-papas* which compels the subtle and causal bodies to look for another physical body for their fulfillment. On contrary to this process, in the life of a realized person, there is no fresh *punya-papa* that is kept in store for the next birth. At death of a liberated person, three bodies merge into the total universe. There is nothing surviving as an individual for *ajnani*. Since there is no *jiva* as a principle of individual, freedom from cycle of birth and death becomes possible. At death, a realized person attains videha mukti as a freedom from *punarjanma*.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is the necessity of Self-realization?

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2) Discuss the means to self realization.

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3) Illustrate the benefits of Knowledge of the Self.

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## 1.10 LET US SUM UP

Each Upanishad generally takes up the responsibility of caring for the spiritual welfare of the individual. In turn they are expected to render their service to groups that for the society and the nation. Katha Upanishad has been acclaimed as the most popular one as per the structure in the form of a dialogue between Nachiketas and Yama. The Upanishad tells the story of Nachiketas, the son of

Vajashrava, who learns the teachings imparted by Yama. Starting with the story, the Upanishad unfolds the profound philosophical truths. It reveals the truths of this world and the other world that is beyond human comprehension. The distinction of Self from mind and body is clearly made in the Upanishad. Desire, anger, hatred, fear all belong to the mind. Similarly hunger and thirst pertain to the body. None of these belong to the Self. Objective view on the things without identifying them with the Self, makes one realize the imperishable Self. The self is not just mind and body. Even while living, one cannot treat them as oneself. The self alone will shine when there is complete eradication of the desires and consciousness of the body.

For such persons there is no death. Death is only for the body and not for the self. The goal of life is set in the words of God of Death. Liberation is the final goal of one's life. When one achieves liberation he is freed of death, rebirth and all the sorrows of existence. Those who practice austerity, control of mind and sense, spiritual discipline reach the realm of Brahman. Right step on the path of mediation and self realization is to merge the power of speech in the mind and the mind in the intellect and the intellect in the great self. Liberation means freedom from rebirth. Knowledge of Self makes such a release possible. This knowledge comes from realizing the true nature of Self. He is a smokeless flame. It is ever consciousness. The metaphor of uprooted tree with the roots towards the sky is given to explain that heaven is the root of all life. The self is source of all. It sustains everything and gives life to all that is dependent on it. It is independent eventhough it resides in the cavity of the hearts of all. All things and beings receive their support and strength from the Self. When prana goes out, Self alone remains. Even after the decay of the physical body, the unchanging Self survives.

Realization of the nature of the Self comes not from mere learning or scriptural scholarship. It is not dependent on the intellect or intuition. The realization is the *anubhava*, experiential. Realization is not something of new discovery. It is just becoming aware of what is already present. Due to ignorance self is not recognized or known. The hidden self beneath everything is to be realized. The unrealized would face the condition of cycle of birth and death continuously. Anyone who thinks that he is an intelligent and enlightened person would surely goes through the cycle of birth and death again and again. Meditating upon the self one gets rid of ignorance. Anyone who lives in the world without the awareness of the body is called as *jivan mukta*. When all desires that dwell in the heart are destroyed and ignorance is dispelled, and then you become immortal. The Upanishad declares that anyone who is aware of the Self is a liberated person in whom there is no death. He becomes Immortal.

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## 1.11 KEY WORDS

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- Metaphor** : Metaphor (from Latin *metaphoria*) is language that directly connects seemingly unrelated subjects. It is a figure of speech that connects two or more things. More generally, a metaphor describes a first subject as *being* or *equal to* a second object in some way.
- Rebirth** : Rebirth refers to reincarnation, belief that some essential part of a living being survives death to be reborn in a new body.



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## 1.12 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 1.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress I

- 1) When Nachiketas meets Lord Yama he is granted three boons. The little boy asked for firstly, pacification of his father, secondly a fire ritual to gain *swarga*, heaven, thirdly, knowledge of the Self.
- 2) The nature of the Self is that it is unborn, eternal, everlasting, ancient and not destroyed. There is no birth and death for the intelligent Self. It is all pervading, far, near and everywhere. It is joyful as well as joyless. It is bodiless and all pervading. It is smaller than the smallest; at the same time it is greater than the greatest. The *purusa* is the subtlest. It is subtler than sensory objects, senses, mind, intellect and even *mahat*, the manifested *Hiranyagarbha* and the unmanifested *avyakta*. Self is hidden in all things. The Self is soundless, formless, imperishable, tasteless, odourless, eternal, constant, all pervading, subtlest, omniscient and omnipotent. Its light is greater than that of the Sun, Moon, Stars, lightning and fire.

### Check Your Progress II

- 1) Only a person who has realized the Self can impart the knowledge of Self. The difficulty lies in the discrimination of what is self and the non-self. What is in the manifest world is there in the unmanifest Brahman. An ordinary man fails to realize this truth and sees the world as different from

Brahman. Only few wise men that are desirous of immortality turn their attention internally and have the quest of self-knowledge and self-realization.

- 2) Knowledge of the Self cannot be obtained only through logical arguments. Knowledge is more than logical reasoning. It cannot be known by the scriptural knowledge or by mere human intelligence. It is possible only by internal realization and experience. One who restrains from bad conduct. Anyone with unrestrained mind becomes only impure and gets immersed in material pleasures. The senses are to be controlled by the mind and the mind is controlled by the self. Only that person who lives without any worldly desires becomes immortal. Realization is through concentration of mind and locating the Self in the inner most being of oneself.
- 3) At the realization one does not grieve as ignorance is got rid off by meditation upon the self. The realized self does not grieve because he experiences the Self as the self-same and all pervading. It dwells in the hearts of all without any physical attachment and is without any name or form. The wise realizes then truth that the self is distinct from the sense organs. They are only the product of the five basic elements of nature. Their existence and fields of activities are limited and changing. The self is entirely different from them as unlimited and unchanging. By beholding the self as “this is that” one fears not. Having been liberated, one becomes absolutely free from the web of births and deaths.