

Hinduism: Texts

The Katha Upanishad

This Upanishad is a dialogue between Nachiketa and Yama, the King of Death. The question it discusses is whether there is a life after death, the question presented as Nachiketa's third request.

When a man dies, there is this doubt: Some say he is (that is, he continues to exist after death); others say, he is not. Taught by you, I would know the truth.

Before Nachiketa can obtain an answer to this question, however, he must first go through a spiritual preparation. The question of life after death, the King of Death implies, like other religious topics, cannot be approached in a purely objective fashion, as if it were simply a matter of grasping a factual truth. We must be spiritually ready to receive the answer, otherwise it will be lost on us. Yama therefore first puts Nachiketa to the test, by refusing to answer his question.

Nay, even the gods were once puzzled by this mystery. Subtle indeed is the truth regarding it, not easy to understand. Choose some other boon, O Nachiketa.

When Nachiketa is not put off, but insists on an answer, Yama tries to distract him with other tempting offers. He will give him wealth, or political power, or the delights of sexual intercourse. But Nachiketa stands firm.

These things endure only till the morrow . . . How shall he desire wealth,
O Death, who once has seen your face? . . . Knowing well the vanity of the
flesh, how shall I wish for long life? . . . No other boon will I ask.

Nachiketa shows that he has already acquired a certain degree of detachment from himself, so he passes the test, and Yama, satisfied, begins to teach him.

His teaching, in a nutshell, is that the question about a life after death is misguided, for it rests on a twofold mistaken presupposition, namely that we truly exist as distinct individuals in what we are pleased to call this life, and that the prolongation of this existence will be a good thing. A being can continue to exist only if it already existed previously. In truth, however, there are two aspects to us: we possess two selves. One of them is our True Self and the other is a mere illusion. Our True Self, our Atman, is nothing less than the eternal and infinite Brahman, always in existence and incapable of dying. Our merely apparent self is the individual self or identity that we attribute to ourself when we normally think of “ourself,” the being who dwells in this body and thinks with this mind. This apparent self is the source of all our misery and our aim must be to get rid of it, to dispel the illusion it represents.

We achieve this by attaining the knowledge of Brahman, through meditation. We must purify our mind of all self-centered desire, attaining a standpoint where we are utterly unconcerned about our personal fate. And since the question about life after death is an expression of self-centered desire, it follows, presumably, that we must give up asking for it!

If we do not attain this purification of the mind and knowledge of Brahman, we will remain mired in illusion. That illusion, of our individual existence, will then be continued after death into reincarnation, either as a human being or as some other form of life.

Of those ignorant of the Self, some enter into beings possessed of wombs, others enter into plants – according to their deeds and the growth of their intelligence. [See p. 49 below.]

If a man fail to attain Brahman before he casts off his body, he must again put on a body in the world of created things. [See p. 50 below.]

In other words, life after death is not, as we usually assume, something desirable, but merely a prolongation of ignorance and misery.

Brahman is “neither cause nor effect” of the world, for the world does not truly exist. As the Hindu philosopher Shankara was to explain centuries later, what we call “the world” arises because we in our minds “superimpose” on the only truly existent reality, Brahman, an appearance or illusion of individuality and multiplicity. The Upanishadic view of the world is therefore fundamentally different from that of the religions of Semitic origin, for example, which see the world as created by God, and therefore real, though its reality is subordinate.

Om . . .
May Brahman protect us,
May he guide us,
May he give us strength and right understanding.
May love and harmony be with us all.
OM . . . Peace – peace – peace.

On a certain occasion Vajasrabasa, hoping for divine favor, performed a rite which required that he should give away all his possessions. He was careful, however, to sacrifice only his cattle, and of these only such as were useless – the old, the barren, the blind, and the lame. Observing this niggardliness, Nachiketa, his young son, whose heart had received the truth taught in the scriptures, thought to himself: “Surely a worshipper who dares bring such worthless gifts is doomed to utter darkness!” Thus reflecting, he came to his father, and cried:

“Father, I too belong to you: to whom do you give me?”

His father did not answer; but when Nachiketa asked the question again and yet again, he replied impatiently: “I give you to Death!”

Then Nachiketa thought to himself: “Of my father’s many sons and disciples I am indeed the best, or at least of the middle rank, not the worst; but of what good am I to the King of Death?” Yet, being determined to keep his father’s word, he said:

“Father, do not repent your vow! Consider how it has been with those that have gone before, and how it will be with those that now live. Like corn, a man ripens and falls to the ground; like corn, he springs up again in his season.”

Having thus spoken, the boy journeyed to the house of Death.

But the god was not at home, and for three nights Nachiketa waited. When at length the King of Death returned, he was met by his servants, who said to him:

“A Brahmin, like to a flame of fire, entered your house as guest, and you were not there. Therefore must a peace offering be made to him. With all accustomed rites, O King, must you receive your guest, for if a householder show not due hospitality to a Brahmin, he will lose what he most desires – the merits of his good deeds, his righteousness, his sons, and his cattle.”

Then the King of Death approached Nachiketa and welcomed him with courteous words.

“O Brahmin,” he said, “I salute you. You are indeed a guest worthy of all reverence. Let, I pray you, no harm befall me! Three nights have you passed in my house and have not received my hospitality; ask of me, therefore, three boons – one for each night.”

“O Death,” replied Nachiketa, “so let it be. And as the first of these boons I ask that my father be not anxious about me, that his anger be appeased, and that when you send me back to him, he recognize me and welcome me.”

“By my will,” declared Death, “your father shall recognize you and love you as heretofore; and seeing you again alive, he shall be tranquil of mind, and he shall sleep in peace.”

Then said Nachiketa: "In heaven there is no fear at all. You, O Death, are not there, nor in that place does the thought of growing old make one tremble. There, free from hunger and from thirst, and far from the reach of sorrow all rejoice and are glad. You know, O King, the fire sacrifice that leads to heaven. Teach me that sacrifice, for I am full of faith. This is my second wish."

Whereupon, consenting, Death taught the boy the fire sacrifice, and all the rites and ceremonies attending it. Nachiketa repeated all that he had learned, and Death, well pleased with him, said:

"I grant you an extra boon. Henceforth shall this sacrifice be called the Nachiketa Sacrifice, after your name. Choose now your third boon."

And then Nachiketa considered within himself, and said:

"When a man dies, there is this doubt: Some say, he is; others say, he is not. Taught by you, I would know the truth. This is my third wish."

"Nay," replied Death, "even the gods were once puzzled by this mystery. Subtle indeed is the truth regarding it, not easy to understand. Choose some other boon, O Nachiketa."

But Nachiketa would not be denied.

"You say, O Death, that even the gods were once puzzled by this mystery, and that it is not easy to understand. Surely there is no teacher better able to explain it than you – and there is no other boon equal to this."

To which, trying Nachiketa again, the god replied:

"Ask for sons and grandsons who shall live a hundred years. Ask for cattle, elephants, horses, gold. Choose for yourself a mighty kingdom. Or if you can imagine aught better, ask for that – not for sweet pleasures only but for the power, beyond all thought, to taste their sweetness. Truly, the supreme enjoyer will I make you of every good thing. Celestial maidens, beautiful to behold, such indeed as were not meant for mortals – even these, together with their bright chariots and their musical instruments, will I give unto you, to serve you. But for the secret of death, O Nachiketa, do not ask!"

But Nachiketa stood fast, and said: "These things endure only till the morrow, O Destroyer of Life, and the pleasures they give wear out the senses. Keep horses and chariots, keep dance and song, for yourself! How shall he desire wealth, O Death, who once has seen your face? Nay, only the boon that I have chosen – that only do I ask. Having found out the society of the imperishable and the immortal, as in knowing you I have done, how shall I, subject to decay and death, and knowing well the vanity of the flesh – how shall I wish for long life?"

"Tell me, O King, the supreme secret regarding which men doubt. No other boon will I ask."

Whereupon the King of Death, well pleased at heart, began to teach Nachiketa the secret of immortality.

KING OF DEATH

The good is one thing; the pleasant is another. These two, differing in their ends, both prompt to action. Blessed are they that choose the good; they that choose the pleasant miss the goal.

Both the good and the pleasant present themselves to men. The wise, having examined both, distinguish the one from the other. The wise prefer the good to the pleasant; the foolish, driven by fleshly desires, prefer the pleasant to the good.

You, O Nachiketa, having looked upon fleshly desires, delightful to the senses, have renounced them all. You have turned from the miry way wherein many a man wallows.

Far from each other, and leading to different ends, are ignorance and knowledge. You, O Nachiketa, I regard as one who aspires after knowledge, for a multitude of pleasant objects were unable to tempt you.

Living in the abyss of ignorance yet wise in their own conceit, deluded fools go round and round, the blind led by the blind.

To the thoughtless youth, deceived by the vanity of earthly possessions, the path that leads to the eternal abode is not revealed. This world alone is real, there is no hereafter – thinking thus, he falls again and again, birth after birth, into my jaws.

To many it is not given to hear of the Self. Many, though they hear of it, do not understand it. Wonderful is he who speaks of it. Intelligent is he who learns of it. Blessed is he who, taught by a good teacher, is able to understand it.

The truth of the Self cannot be fully understood when taught by an ignorant man, for opinions regarding it, not founded in knowledge, vary one from another. Subtler than the subtlest is this Self, and beyond all logic. Taught by a teacher who knows the Self and Brahman as one, a man leaves vain theory behind and attains to truth.

The awakening which you have known does not come through the intellect, but rather, in fullest measure, from the lips of the wise. Beloved Nachiketa, blessed, blessed are you, because you seek the Eternal. Would that I had more pupils like you!

Well I know that earthly treasure lasts but till the morrow. For did not I myself, wishing to be King of Death, make sacrifice with fire? But the sacrifice was a fleeting thing, performed with fleeting objects, and small is my reward, seeing that only for a moment will my reign endure.

The goal of worldly desire, the glittering objects for which all men long, the celestial pleasures they hope to gain by religious rites, the most sought-after of miraculous powers – all these were within your grasp. But all these, with firm resolve, you have renounced.

The ancient, effulgent being, the indwelling Spirit, subtle, deep-hidden in the lotus of the heart, is hard to know. But the wise man, following the path of meditation, knows him, and is freed alike from pleasure and from pain. The man who has learned that the Self is separate from the body, the senses, and the

mind, and has fully known him, the soul of truth, the subtle principle – such a man verily attains to him, and is exceeding glad, because he has found the source and dwelling place of all felicity. Truly do I believe, O Nachiketa, that for you the gates of joy stand open.

NACHIKETA

Teach me, O King, I beseech you, whatsoever you know to be beyond right and wrong, beyond cause and effect, beyond past, present, and future.

KING OF DEATH

Of that goal which all the Vedas declare, which is implicit in all penances, and in pursuit of which men lead lives of continence and service, of that will I briefly speak. It is – OM. This syllable is Brahman. This syllable is indeed supreme. He who knows it obtains his desire. It is the strongest support. It is the highest symbol. He who knows it is revered as a knower of Brahman. The Self, whose symbol is OM, is the omniscient Lord. He is not born. He does not die. He is neither cause nor effect. This Ancient One is unborn, imperishable, eternal: though the body be destroyed, he is not killed. If the slayer think that he slays, if the slain think that he is slain, neither of them knows the truth. The Self slays not, nor is he slain. Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, this Self forever dwells within the hearts of all. When a man is free from desire, his mind and senses purified, he beholds the glory of the Self and is without sorrow. Though seated, he travels far; though at rest, he moves all things. Who but the purest of the pure can realize this Effulgent Being, who is joy and who is beyond joy. Formless is he, though inhabiting form. In the midst of the fleeting he abides forever. All-pervading and supreme is the Self. The wise man, knowing him in his true nature, transcends all grief.

The Self is not known through study of the scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning; but by him who longs for him is he known. Verily unto him does the Self reveal his true being. By learning, a man cannot know him, if he desist not from evil, if he control not his senses, if he quiet not his mind, and practice not meditation. To him Brahmins and Kshatriyas are but food, and death itself a condiment.

Both the individual self and the Universal Self have entered the cave of the heart, the abode of the Most High, but the knowers of Brahman and the householders who perform the fire sacrifices see a difference between them as between sunshine and shadow.

May we perform the Nachiketa Sacrifice which bridges the world of suffering. May we know the imperishable Brahman, who is fearless, and who is the end and refuge of those who seek liberation.

Know that the Self is the rider, and the body the chariot; that the intellect is the charioteer, and the mind the reins.

The senses, say the wise, are the horses; the roads they travel are the mazes of desire. The wise call the Self the enjoyer when he is united with the body, the senses, and the mind.

When a man lacks discrimination and his mind is uncontrolled, his senses are unmanageable, like the restive horses of a charioteer. But when a man has discrimination and his mind is controlled, his senses, like the well-broken horses of a charioteer, lightly obey the rein.

He who lacks discrimination, whose mind is unsteady and whose heart is impure, never reaches the goal, but is born again and again. But he who has discrimination, whose mind is steady and whose heart is pure, reaches the goal, and having reached it is born no more.

The man who has a sound understanding for charioteer, a controlled mind for reins – he it is that reaches the end of the journey, the supreme abode of Vishnu, the all-pervading.

The senses derive from physical objects, physical objects from mind, mind from intellect, intellect from ego, ego from the unmanifested seed, and the unmanifested seed from Brahman – the Uncaused Cause.

Brahman is the end of the journey. Brahman is the supreme goal.

This Brahman, this Self, deep-hidden in all beings, is not revealed to all; but to the seers, pure in heart, concentrated in mind – to them is he revealed.

The senses of the wise man obey his mind, his mind obeys his intellect, his intellect obeys his ego, and his ego obeys the Self.

Arise! Awake! Approach the feet of the master and know that. Like the sharp edge of a razor, the sages say, is the path. Narrow it is, and difficult to tread! Soundless, formless, intangible, undying, tasteless, odorless, without beginning, without end, eternal, immutable beyond nature, is the Self. Knowing him as such, one is freed from death.

THE NARRATOR

The wise man, having heard and taught the eternal truth revealed by the King of Death to Nachiketa, is glorified in the heaven of Brahma.

He who sings with devotion this supreme secret in the assembly of the Brahmins, or at the rites in memory of his fathers, is rewarded with rewards immeasurable!

KING OF DEATH

The Self-Existent made the senses turn outward. Accordingly, man looks toward what is without, and sees not what is within. Rare is he who, longing for immortality, shuts his eyes to what is without and beholds the Self.

Fools follow the desires of the flesh and fall into the snare of all-encompassing death; but the wise, knowing the Self as eternal, seek not the things that pass

away. He through whom man sees, tastes, smells, hears, feels, and enjoys is the omniscient Lord.

He, verily, is the immortal Self. Knowing him, one knows all things.

He through whom man experiences the sleeping or waking states is the all-pervading Self. Knowing him, one grieves no more.

He who knows that the individual soul, enjoyer of the fruits of action, is the Self – ever present within, lord of time, past and future – casts out all fear. For this Self is the immortal Self.

He who sees the First-Born – born of the mind of Brahma, born before the creation of waters – and sees him inhabiting the lotus of the heart, living among physical elements, sees Brahman indeed. For this First-Born is the immortal Self.

That being who is the power of all powers, and is born as such, who embodies himself in the elements and in them exists, and who has entered the lotus of the heart, is the immortal Self.

Agni, the all-seeing, who lies hidden in fire sticks, like a child well guarded in the womb, who is worshiped day by day by awakened souls, and by those who offer oblations in sacrificial fire – he is the immortal Self.

That in which the sun rises and in which it sets, that which is the source of all the powers of nature and of the senses, that which nothing can transcend – that is the immortal Self.

What is within us is also without. What is without is also within. He who sees difference between what is within and what is without goes evermore from death to death.

By the purified mind alone is the indivisible Brahman to be attained. Brahman alone is – nothing else is. He who sees the manifold universe, and not the one reality, goes evermore from death to death.

That being, of the size of a thumb, dwells deep within the heart. He is the lord of time, past and future. Having attained him, one fears no more. He, verily, is the immortal Self.

That being, of the size of a thumb, is like a flame without smoke. He is the lord of time, past and future, the same today and tomorrow. He, verily, is the immortal Self.

As rain, fallen on a hill, streams down its side, so runs he after many births who sees manifoldness in the Self.

As pure water poured into pure water remains pure, so does the Self remain pure, O Nachiketa, uniting with Brahman.

To the Birthless, the light of whose consciousness forever shines, belongs the city of eleven gates. He who meditates on the ruler of that city knows no more sorrow. He attains liberation, and for him there can no longer be birth or death. For the ruler of that city is the immortal Self.

The immortal Self is the sun shining in the sky, he is the breeze blowing in space, he is the fire burning on the altar, he is the guest dwelling in the house; he is in all men, he is in the gods, he is in the ether, he is wherever there is truth; he is the fish that is born in water, he is the plant that grows in the soil, he is the river that gushes from the mountain – he, the changeless reality, the illimitable!

He, the adorable one, seated in the heart, is the power that gives breath. Unto him all the senses do homage.

What can remain when the dweller in this body leaves the outgrown shell, since he is, verily, the immortal Self?

Man does not live by breath alone, but by him in whom is the power of breath.

And now, O Nachiketa, will I tell you of the unseen, the eternal Brahman, and of what befalls the Self after death.

Of those ignorant of the Self, some enter into beings possessed of wombs, others enter into plants – according to their deeds and the growth of their intelligence.

That which is awake in us even while we sleep, shaping in dream the objects of our desire – that indeed is pure, that is Brahman, and that verily is called the Immortal. All the worlds have their being in that, and no one can transcend it. That is the Self.

As fire, though one, takes the shape of every object which it consumes, so the Self, though one, takes the shape of every object in which it dwells.

As air, though one, takes the shape of every object which it enters, so the Self, though one, takes the shape of every object in which it dwells.

As the sun, revealer of all objects to the seer, is not harmed by the sinful eye, nor by the impurities of the objects it gazes on, so the one Self, dwelling in all, is not touched by the evils of the world. For he transcends all.

He is one, the lord and innermost Self of all; of one form, he makes of himself many forms. To him who sees the Self revealed in his own heart belongs eternal bliss – to none else, to none else!

Intelligence of the intelligent, eternal among the transient, he, though one, makes possible the desires of many. To him who sees the Self revealed in his own heart belongs eternal peace – to none else, to none else!

NACHIKETA

How, O King, shall I find that blissful Self, supreme, ineffable, who is attained by the wise? Does he shine by himself, or does he reflect another's light?

KING OF DEATH

Him the sun does not illumine, nor the moon, nor the stars, nor the lightning – nor, verily, fires kindled upon the earth. He is the one light that gives light to all. He shining, everything shines.

This universe is a tree eternally existing, its root aloft, its branches spread below. The pure root of the tree is Brahman, the immortal, in whom the three worlds have their being, whom none can transcend, who is verily the Self.

The whole universe came forth from Brahman and moves in Brahman. Mighty and awful is he, like to a thunderbolt crashing loud through the heavens. For those who attain him death has no terror.

In fear of him fire burns, the sun shines, the rains fall, the winds blow, and death kills.

If a man fail to attain Brahman before he casts off his body, he must again put on a body in the world of created things.

In one's own soul Brahman is realized clearly, as if seen in a mirror. In the heaven of Brahma also is Brahman realized clearly, as one distinguishes light from darkness. In the world of the fathers he is beheld as in a dream. In the world of angels he appears as if reflected in water.

The senses have separate origin in their several objects. They may be active, as in the waking state, or they may be inactive, as in sleep. He who knows them to be distinct from the changeless Self grieves no more.

Above the senses is the mind. Above the mind is the intellect. Above the intellect is the ego. Above the ego is the unmanifested seed, the Primal Cause.

And verily beyond the unmanifested seed is Brahman, the all-pervading spirit, the unconditioned, knowing whom one attains to freedom and achieves immortality.

None beholds him with the eyes, for he is without visible form. Yet in the heart is he revealed, through self-control and meditation. Those who know him become immortal.

When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not – then, say the wise, is reached the highest state.

This calm of the senses and the mind has been defined as yoga. He who attains it is freed from delusion.

In one not freed from delusion this calm is uncertain, unreal: it comes and goes. Brahman words cannot reveal, mind cannot reach, eyes cannot see. How then, save through those who know him, can he be known?

There are two selves, the apparent self and the real Self. Of these it is the real Self, and he alone, who must be felt as truly existing. To the man who has felt him as truly existing he reveals his innermost nature.

The mortal in whose heart desire is dead becomes immortal. The mortal in whose heart the knots of ignorance are untied becomes immortal. These are the highest truths taught in the scriptures.

Radiating from the lotus of the heart there are a hundred and one nerves. One of these ascends toward the thousand-petaled lotus in the brain. If, when a man comes to die, his vital force passes upward and out through this nerve, he attains immortality; but if his vital force passes out through another nerve, he goes to one or another plane of mortal existence and remains subject to birth and death.

The Supreme Person, of the size of a thumb, the innermost Self, dwells forever in the heart of all beings. As one draws the pith from a reed, so must the aspirant after truth, with great perseverance, separate the Self from the body. Know the Self to be pure and immortal – yea, pure and immortal!

THE NARRATOR

Nachiketa, having learned from the god this knowledge and the whole process of yoga, was freed from impurities and from death, and was united with Brahman. Thus will it be with another also if he know the innermost Self.

OM . . . Peace peace peace.

(*The Upanishads, Breath of the Eternal*, trans.
Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester,
New York, New American Library, 1957)

Questions for discussion

- 1 What is Nachiketa's question?
 - 2 What is the King of Death's answer?
 - 3 What is meant by "The good is one thing, the pleasant is another"?
 - 4 Why does the King of Death describe Brahman as "neither cause nor effect"?
 - 5 What is meant by saying that "Brahman alone is – nothing else is"?
 - 6 What is meant by saying that "There are two selves, the apparent self and the real Self"?
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The *Bhagavad-Gita*

In its present form the Gita is an episode in a much longer poem, the *Mahabharata*, which tells the story of a war between two clans. As the Gita opens, the two armies are drawn up on the field of battle. The leader of one side, Arjuna, faces a dilemma. By an irony of war, the opposing army contains not only enemies, but also his own relatives, teachers, and friends. Which would be worse, to lose the battle or to win it? "If we kill them, none of us will wish to live." He turns for advice to his charioteer, who is none other than Krishna, the incarnation of the god Vishnu. Krishna uses the situation as an opportunity to give Arjuna some instruction. This somewhat artificial set-up is a pretext for the author to convey religious and ethical ideas.

Krishna, that is, Vishnu, begins by teaching Arjuna the doctrine of the Upanishads (which we have seen above), that mortal life and death belong

to the world of appearances, not to reality. The true reality of every being, the Atman, is indestructible. This applies not only to Krishna, but also to Arjuna and the opposing camps. “There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be.” The Atman is “unborn, undying, never ceasing, never beginning, deathless, birthless, unchanging for ever.” “Therefore, you should never mourn for anyone.” Arjuna’s cause is just, the war is righteous, his caste duty as a Kshatriya is to fight. He should be utterly indifferent to victory or defeat, life or death. If he does not fight he could be accused of cowardice.

Krishna proceeds to teach Arjuna about the various pathways to attain this state of indifference, this realization of the Eternal Self. These paths are comprised under the heading of yoga.

SANJAYA (THE NARRATOR)

Then his eyes filled with tears, and his heart grieved and was bewildered with pity. And Sri Krishna spoke to him, saying:

SRI KRISHNA

Arjuna, is this hour of battle the time for scruples and fancies? Are they worthy of you, who seek enlightenment? Any brave man who merely hopes for fame or heaven would despise them.

What is this weakness? It is beneath you. Is it for nothing men call you the Foe-consumer? Shake off this cowardice, Arjuna. Stand up.

ARJUNA

Bhishma and Drona are noble and ancient, worthy of the deepest reverence. How can I greet them with arrows, in battle? If I kill them, how can I ever enjoy my wealth, or any other pleasure? It will be cursed with blood-guilt. I would much rather spare them, and eat the bread of a beggar.

Which will be worse, to win this war, or to lose it? I scarcely know. Even the sons of Dhritarashtra stand in the enemy ranks. If we kill them, none of us will wish to live.

Is this real compassion that I feel, or only a delusion? My mind gropes about in darkness. I cannot see where my duty lies. Krishna, I beg you, tell me frankly and clearly what I ought to do. I am your disciple. I put myself into your hands. Show me the way.

Not this world's kingdom,
Supreme, unchallenged,
No, nor the throne
Of the gods in heaven,
Could ease this sorrow
That numbs my senses!

SANJAYA

When Arjuna, the foe-consuming, the never-slothful, had spoken thus to Govinda (another name for Krishna), ruler of the senses, he added: "I will not fight," and was silent.

Then to him who thus sorrowed between the two armies, the ruler of the senses spoke, smiling:

SRI KRISHNA

Your words are wise, Arjuna, but your sorrow is for nothing. The truly wise mourn neither for the living nor for the dead.

There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be.

Just as the dweller in this body passes through childhood, youth and old age, so at death he merely passes into another kind of body. The wise are not deceived by that.

Feelings of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, are caused by the contact of the senses with their objects. They come and they go, never lasting long. You must accept them.

A serene spirit accepts pleasure and pain with an even mind, and is unmoved by either. He alone is worthy of immortality.

That which is non-existent can never come into being, and that which is can never cease to be. Those who have known the inmost Reality know also the nature of is and is not.

That Reality which pervades the universe is indestructible. No one has power to change the Changeless.

Bodies are said to die, but That which possesses the body is eternal. It cannot be limited, or destroyed. Therefore you must fight.

Some say this Atman
Is slain, and others
Call It the slayer:
They know nothing.
How can It slay
Or who shall slay It?

Know this Atman
Unborn, undying,
Never ceasing,
Never beginning,
Deathless, birthless,
Unchanging for ever.
How can It die
The death of the body?

Knowing It birthless,
Knowing It deathless,
Knowing It endless,
For ever unchanging,
Dream not you do
The deed of the killer,
Dream not the power
Is yours to command it.

Worn-out garments
Are shed by the body:
Worn-out bodies
Are shed by the dweller
Within the body.
New bodies are donned
By the dweller, like garments.

Not wounded by weapons,
Not burned by fire,
Not dried by the wind,
Not wetted by water:
Such is the Atman,

Not dried, not wetted,
Not burned, not wounded,
Innermost element,
Everywhere, always,
Being of beings,
Changeless, eternal,
For ever and ever.

This Atman cannot be manifested to the senses, or thought about by the mind. It is not subject to modification. Since you know this, you should not grieve.

But if you should suppose this Atman to be subject to constant birth and death, even then you ought not to be sorry.

Death is certain for the born. Rebirth is certain for the dead. You should not grieve for what is unavoidable.

Before birth, beings are not manifest to our human senses. In the interim between birth and death, they are manifest. At death they return to the unmanifest again. What is there in all this to grieve over!

There are some who have actually looked upon the Atman, and understood It, in all Its wonder. Others can only speak of It as wonderful beyond their understanding. Others know of Its wonder by hearsay. And there are others who are told about It and do not understand a word.

He Who dwells within all living bodies remains for ever indestructible. Therefore, you should never mourn for any one.

Even if you consider this from the standpoint of your own caste-duty, you ought not to hesitate; for, to a warrior, there is nothing nobler than a righteous war. Happy are the warriors to whom a battle such as this comes: it opens a door to heaven.

But if you refuse to fight this righteous war, you will be turning aside from your duty. You will be a sinner, and disgraced. People will speak ill of you throughout the ages. To a man who values his honor, that is surely worse than death. The warrior-chiefs will believe it was fear that drove you from the battle; you will be despised by those who have admired you so long. Your enemies, also, will slander your courage. They will use the words which should never be spoken. What could be harder to bear than that?

Die, and you win heaven. Conquer, and you enjoy the earth. Stand up now, son of Kunti, and resolve to fight. Realize that pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, are all one and the same: then go into battle. Do this and you cannot commit any sin.

I have explained to you the true nature of the Atman. Now listen to the method of Karma Yoga. If you can understand and follow it, you will be able to break the chains of desire which bind you to your actions.

In this yoga, even the abortive attempt is not wasted. Nor can it produce a contrary result. Even a little practice of this yoga will save you from the terrible wheel of rebirth and death.

In this yoga, the will is directed singly toward one ideal. When a man lacks this discrimination, his will wanders in all directions, after innumerable aims. Those who lack discrimination may quote the letter of the scripture, but they are really denying its inner truth. They are full of worldly desires, and hungry for the rewards of heaven. They use beautiful figures of speech. They teach elaborate rituals which are supposed to obtain pleasure and power for those who perform them. But, actually, they understand nothing except the law of Karma, that chains men to rebirth.

Those whose discrimination is stolen away by such talk grow deeply attached to pleasure and power. And so they are unable to develop that concentration of the will which leads a man to absorption in God.

The Vedas teach us about the three gunas and their functions. You, Arjuna, must overcome the three gunas. You must be free from the pairs of opposites. Poise your mind in tranquillity. Take care neither to acquire nor to hoard. Be established in the consciousness of the Atman, always.

When the whole country is flooded, the reservoir becomes superfluous. So, to the illumined seer, the Vedas are all superfluous.

You have the right to work, but for the work's sake only. You have no right to the fruits of work. Desire for the fruits of work must never be your motive in working. Never give way to laziness, either.

Perform every action with your heart fixed on the Supreme Lord. Renounce attachment to the fruits. Be even-tempered in success and failure; for it is this evenness of temper which is meant by yoga.

Work done with anxiety about results is far inferior to work done without such anxiety, in the calm of self-surrender. Seek refuge in the knowledge of Brahman. They who work selfishly for results are miserable.

In the calm of self-surrender you can free yourself from the bondage of virtue and vice during this very life. Devote yourself, therefore, to reaching union with Brahman. To unite the heart with Brahman and then to act: that is the secret of non-attached work. In the calm of self-surrender, the seers renounce the fruits of their actions, and so reach enlightenment. Then they are free from the bondage of rebirth, and pass to that state which is beyond all evil.

When your intellect has cleared itself of its delusions, you will become indifferent to the results of all action, present or future. At present, your intellect is bewildered by conflicting interpretations of the scriptures. When it can rest, steady and undistracted, in contemplation of the Atman, then you will reach union with the Atman.

ARJUNA

Krishna, how can one identify a man who is firmly established and absorbed in Brahman? In what manner does an illumined soul speak? How does he sit? How does he walk?

SRI KRISHNA

He knows bliss in the Atman
And wants nothing else.
Cravings torment the heart:
He renounces cravings.
I call him illumined.

Not shaken by adversity,
Not hankering after happiness:
Free from fear, free from anger,
Free from the things of desire.
I call him a seer, and illumined.
The bonds of his flesh are broken.
He is lucky, and does not rejoice:

He is unlucky, and does not weep.
I call him illumined.

The tortoise can draw in his legs:
The seer can draw in his senses.
I call him illumined.

The abstinent run away from what they desire
But carry their desires with them:
When a man enters Reality,
He leaves his desires behind him.
Even a mind that knows the path
Can be dragged from the path:

The senses are so unruly.
But he controls the senses
And recollects the mind
And fixes it on me.
I call him illumined.

Thinking about sense-objects
Will attach you to sense-objects;
Grow attached, and you become addicted;
Thwart your addiction, it turns to anger;
Be angry, and you confuse your mind;
Confuse your mind, you forget the lesson of experience;
Forget experience, you lose discrimination;
Lose discrimination, and you miss life's only purpose.

When he has no lust, no hatred,
A man walks safely among the things of lust and hatred.
To obey the Atman
Is his peaceful joy:
Sorrow melts
Into that clear peace:
His quiet mind
Is soon established in peace.

The uncontrolled mind
Does not guess that the Atman is present:
How can it meditate?
Without meditation, where is peace?
Without peace, where is happiness?

The wind turns a ship
From its course upon the waters:
The wandering winds of the senses
Cast man's mind adrift

And turn his better judgment from its course.
When a man can still the senses
I call him illumined.

The recollected mind is awake
In the knowledge of the Atman
Which is dark night to the ignorant:
The ignorant are awake in their sense-life
Which they think is daylight:
To the seer it is darkness.

Water flows continually into the ocean
But the ocean is never disturbed:
Desire flows into the mind of the seer
But he is never disturbed.
The seer knows peace:
The man who stirs up his own lusts
Can never know peace.
He knows Peace who has forgotten desire.
He lives without craving:
Free from ego, free from pride.

This is the state of enlightenment in Brahman.
A man does not fall back from it
Into delusion.
Even at the moment of death
He is alive in that enlightenment:
Brahman and he are one.

*(Bhagavad-Gita, trans. Swami Prabhavananda
and Christopher Isherwood, New York,
New American Library, 1954)*

Questions for discussion

- 1 Why does Krishna tell Arjuna to fight?
 - 2 What is the Karma Yoga which Krishna explains to Arjuna?
 - 3 What is your reaction to the statement, “He knows peace who has forgotten desire”?
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The Gita II

In this section Krishna explains that there is an alternative to the arduous path of the hermit which the Upanishads had preached: the path of selfless action, resulting from devotional attachment to Krishna himself.

XII The Yoga of Devotion

ARJUNA

Some worship you with steadfast love. Others worship God the unmanifest and changeless. Which kind of devotee has the greater understanding of yoga?

SRI KRISHNA

Those whose minds are fixed on me in steadfast love, worshipping me with absolute faith. I consider them to have the greater understanding of yoga.

As for those others, the devotees of God the unmanifest, indefinable and changeless, they worship that which is omnipresent, constant, eternal, beyond thought's compass, never to be moved. They have all the senses in check. They are tranquil-minded, and devoted to the welfare of humanity. They see the Atman in every creature. They also will certainly come to me.

But the devotees of the unmanifest have a harder task, because the unmanifest is very difficult for embodied souls to realize.

Quickly I come
To those who offer me
Every action,
Worship me only,
Their dearest delight,
With devotion undaunted.

Because they love me
These are my bondsmen
And I shall save them
From mortal sorrow
And all the waves
Of Life's deathly ocean.

Be absorbed in me,
Lodge your mind in me;
Thus you shall dwell in me,
Do not doubt it,
Here and hereafter.

If you cannot become absorbed in me, then try to reach me by repeated concentration. If you lack the strength to concentrate, then devote yourself to works which will please me. For, by working for my sake only, you will achieve perfection. If you cannot even do this, then surrender yourself to me altogether. Control the lusts of your heart, and renounce the fruits of every action.

Concentration which is practiced with discernment is certainly better than the mechanical repetition of a ritual or a prayer. Absorption in God – to live with Him and be one with Him always – is even better than concentration. But renunciation brings instant peace to the spirit.

A man should not hate any living creature. Let him be friendly and compassionate to all. He must free himself from the delusion of “I” and “mine.” He must accept pleasure and pain with equal tranquillity. He must be forgiving, ever-contented, self-controlled, united constantly with me in his meditation. His resolve must be unshakeable. He must be dedicated to me in intellect and in mind. Such a devotee is dear to me.

He neither molests his fellow men, nor allows himself to become disturbed by the world. He is no longer swayed by joy and envy, anxiety and fear. Therefore he is dear to me.

He is pure, and independent of the body’s desire. He is able to deal with the unexpected: prepared for everything, unperturbed by anything. He is neither vain nor anxious about the results of his actions. Such a devotee is dear to me.

He does not desire or rejoice in what is pleasant. He does not dread what is unpleasant, or grieve over it. He remains unmoved by good or evil fortune. Such a devotee is dear to me.

His attitude is the same toward friend and foe. He is indifferent to honor and insult, heat and cold, pleasure and pain. He is free from attachment. He values praise and blame equally. He can control his speech. He is content with whatever he gets. His home is everywhere and nowhere. His mind is fixed upon me, and his heart is full of devotion. He is dear to me.

This true wisdom I have taught will lead you to immortality. The faithful practice it with devotion, taking me for their highest aim. To me they surrender heart and mind. They are exceedingly dear to me.

(Bhagavad-Gita, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood)

Questions for discussion

- 1 What does Krishna mean by saying “Renounce the fruits of every action”?
 - 2 What attitude of mind is meant by “not desiring or rejoicing in what is pleasant”?
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