

The Upaniṣad is famous also for its saying, "It is not understood by those who [say they] understand It. It is understood by those who [say they] understand It not." This statement is intended to indicate the paradoxical nature of the inscrutability of the Absolute, the *Brahman* or *Ātman*.

[Question:] *The real agent in the individual?*

1. By whom impelled soars forth the mind projected?  
By whom enjoined goes forth the earliest breathing?  
By whom impelled this speech do people utter?  
The eye, the ear—what god, pray, them enjoineth?

[Answer:] *The all-conditioning, yet inscrutable agent, Brahman*

2. That which is the hearing of the ear, the thought of the mind,  
The voice of speech, as also the breathing of the breath,  
And the sight of the eye! Past these escaping, the wise,  
On departing from this world, become immortal.
3. There the eyes go not;  
Speech goes not, nor the mind.  
We know not, we understand not  
How one would teach It.  
Other, indeed, is It than the known,  
And moreover above the unknown.  
—Thus have we heard of the ancients  
Who to us have explained It. (i.1-3)

*The paradox of Its inscrutability*

3. [Teacher:]  
It is conceived of by him by whom It is not conceived of.  
He by whom It is conceived of, knows It not.  
It is not understood by those who [say they] understand It.  
It is understood by those who [say they] understand It not.
4. When known by aṅ awakening, It is conceived of; . . . (ii.3-4)

3. KATHA UPANIṢAD

The *Kaṭha* gets its name from a school of the *Black Yajur Veda*. It is perhaps the most philosophical of the Upaniṣads. Among its important features are: the dialogue between Naciketas and Yama (the god of the world of departed spirits) on the question of the immortality of the self,

in which Naciketas chooses knowledge above all worldly blessings; the theory of the superiority of the good (*śreyas*) over the pleasant (*preyas*); the view that the *Ātman* cannot be known by the senses, by reason, or by much learning, but only by intuitive insight or direct realization; and the doctrine of the body as the chariot of the self—a reminder of a similar figure used by Plato.

*The story of Naciketas: knowledge preferable to the greatest earthly pleasures*

1. Now verily, with zeal did Vājaśravasa give his whole possession  
[as a religious gift].  
He had a son, Naciketas by name.
2. Into him, boy as he was, while the sacrificial gifts were being  
led up, faith entered. . . .
4. Then he said to his father: "Papa, to whom will you give me?"—  
a second time—a third time.  
To him then he said: "To Death I give you!"<sup>1</sup>

[Here follows a conversation between Death (Yama) and Naciketas. Death, just returned from a three days' absence and finding that Naciketas has not received the hospitality which is due a *brāhmin*, says, "Therefore in return choose three boons!" His first wish is that he might return to his father on earth; his second is for an understanding of the Naciketas sacrificial fire that leads to heaven. These are granted. The account of the third and most important wish follows in part:]

[Naciketas:]

20. This doubt that there is in regard to a man deceased:  
"He exists," say some; "He exists not," say others—  
This would I know, instructed by thee!  
Of the boons this is boon the third.

[Death:]

21. Even the gods had doubt as to this of yore!  
For truly, it is not easily to be understood. Subtile is this  
matter.  
Another boon, O Naciketas, choose!  
Press me not! Give up this one for me!

<sup>1</sup> Opinions and interpretations of this incident and the motivations involved vary. No attempt is made here to take a position on this debatable question.

[Naciketas:]

22. Even the gods had doubt, indeed, as to this,  
And thou, O Death, sayest that it is not easily to be understood.  
And another declarer of it the like of thee is not to be obtained.  
No other boon the equal of it is there at all.

[Death:]

23. Choose centenarian sons and grandsons,  
Many cattle, elephants, gold, and horses.  
Choose a great abode of earth.  
And thyself live as many autumns as thou desirest.
24. This, if thou thinkest as equal boon,  
Choose—wealth and long life!  
A great one on earth, O Naciketas, be thou.  
The enjoyer of thy desires I make thee.
25. Whate'er desires are hard to get in the mortal world—  
For all desires at pleasure make request.  
These lovely maidens with chariots, with lyres—  
Such [maidens], indeed, are not obtainable by men—  
By these, from me bestowed, be waited on!  
O Naciketas, question me not regarding dying!

[Naciketas:]

26. Ephemeral things! That which is a mortal's, O End-maker,  
Even the vigor of all the powers, they wear away.  
Even a whole life is slight indeed.  
Thine be the vehicles! Thine be the dance and song!
27. Not with wealth is a man to be satisfied.  
Shall we take wealth, if we have seen thee?  
Shall we live so long as thou shalt rule?  
—This, in truth, is the boon to be chosen by me.
28. When one has come into the presence of undecaying immortals,  
What decaying mortal, here below, that understands,  
That meditates upon the pleasures of beauty and delight,  
Would delight in a life over-long?
29. This thing whereon they doubt, O Death:  
What there is in the great passing-on—tell us that!  
This boon, that has entered into the hidden—  
No other than that does Naciketas choose. (I.1-2, 4, 20-29)

*The failure of pleasure and of ignorance; the wisdom of the  
better knowledge*

[Death:]

1. The better (*śreyas*) is one thing, and the pleasanter (*preyas*) quite another.  
Both these, of different aim, bind a person.  
Of these two, well it is for him who takes the better;  
He fails of his aim who chooses the pleasanter.
2. Both the better and the pleasanter come to a man.  
Going all around the two, the wise man discriminates.  
The wise man chooses the better, indeed, rather than the pleasanter.  
The stupid man, from getting-and-keeping, chooses the pleasanter.
3. Thou indeed, upon the pleasant and pleasantly appearing desires  
Meditating, hast let them go, O Naciketas.  
Thou art not one who has taken that garland of wealth  
In which many men sink down.
4. Widely opposite and asunder are these two:  
Ignorance and what is known as "knowledge."  
I think Naciketas desirous of obtaining knowledge!  
Many desires rend thee not.
5. Those abiding in the midst of ignorance,  
Self-wise, thinking themselves learned,  
Running hither and thither, go around deluded,  
Like blind men led by one who is himself blind. (II.1-5)

*The eternal indestructible Self*

18. The wise one [i.e., the *Ātman*, the Self] is not born, nor dies.  
This one has not come from anywhere, has not become anyone.  
Unborn, constant, eternal, primeval, this one  
Is not slain when the body is slain.
19. If the slayer think to slay,  
If the slain think himself slain,  
Both these understand not.  
This one slays not, nor is slain.
20. More minute than the minute, greater than the great,  
Is the Self that is set in the heart of a creature here.

- One who is without the active will beholds Him, and becomes freed from sorrow—  
When through the grace of the Creator he beholds the greatness of the Self.
22. Him who is the bodiless among bodies,  
Stable among the unstable,  
The great, all-pervading Self—  
On recognizing Him, the wise man sorrows not.
23. This Self is not to be obtained by instruction,  
Nor by intellect, nor by much learning.  
He is to be obtained only by the one whom he chooses;  
To such a one that Self reveals his own person.
24. Not he who has not ceased from bad conduct,  
Not he who is not tranquil, not he who is not composed,  
Not he who is not of peaceful mind  
Can obtain Him by intelligence (*prajñā*).
25. He for whom the priesthood and the nobility  
Both are as food,  
And death is as a sauce—  
Who really knows where He is? (II.18–20, 22–5)

*The universal and the individual self*

3. Know thou the self (*ātman*) as riding in a chariot,  
The body as the chariot.  
Know thou the intellect (*buddhi*) as the chariot-driver,  
And the mind as the reins.
4. The senses, they say, are the horses;  
The objects of sense, what they range over.  
The self combined with senses and mind  
Wise men call “the enjoyer.”
7. He, however, who has not understanding,  
Who is unmindful and ever impure,  
Reaches not the goal,  
But goes on to transmigration [rebirth].
8. He, however, who has understanding,  
Who is mindful and ever pure,  
Reaches the goal  
From which he is born no more. . . .
10. Higher than the senses are the objects of sense.  
Higher than the objects of sense is the mind;

- And higher than the mind is the intellect (*buddhi*).  
Higher than the intellect is the Great Self (*Ātman*).
11. Higher than the Great is the Unmanifest (*avyakta*).  
Higher than the Unmanifest is the Person.  
Higher than the Person there is nothing at all.  
That is the goal. That is the highest course.
12. Though He is hidden in all things,  
That Self shines not forth.  
But He is seen by subtle seers  
With superior, subtle intellect.
13. An intelligent man should suppress his speech and his mind.  
The latter he should suppress in the Understanding-Self (*jñāna ātman*).  
The understanding he should suppress in the Great Self.  
That he should suppress in the Tranquil Self. . . .
14. Arise ye! Awake ye!  
Obtain your boons and understand them!  
A sharpened edge of a razor, hard to traverse,  
A difficult path is this—poets declare!
15. What is soundless, touchless, formless, imperishable,  
Likewise tasteless, constant, odorless,  
Without beginning, without end, higher than the great, stable—  
By discerning That, one is liberated from the mouth of death. (III.3–4, 7–8, 10–15)

*The immortal Self not to be sought by outward knowledge*

1. The Self-existent pierced the openings [of the senses] outward;  
Therefore one looks outward, not within himself.  
A certain wise man, while seeking immortality,  
Introspectively beheld the Self face to face.
2. The childish go after outward pleasures;  
They walk into the net of widespread death.  
But the wise, knowing immortality,  
Seek not the stable among things which are unstable here.
3. That by which [one discerns] form, taste, smell,  
Sound, and mutual touches—  
It is with That indeed that one discerns.  
What is there left over here!  
This, verily, is That!

4. By recognizing as the great pervading Self  
That whereby one perceives both  
The sleeping state and the waking state,  
The wise man sorrows not.
10. Whatever is here, that is there.  
What is there, that again is here.  
He obtains death after death  
Who seems to see a difference here.
11. By the mind, indeed, is this [realization] to be attained:—  
There is no difference here at all!  
He goes from death to death  
Who seems to see a difference here. (iv.1-4, 10-11)

*One's real person (self), the same as the world-ground*

8. He who is awake in those that sleep,  
The Person who fashions desire after desire—  
That indeed is the Pure. That is *Brahman*.  
That indeed is called the Immortal.  
On it all the worlds do rest;  
And no one soever goes beyond it.  
This, verily, is That!
9. As the one fire has entered the world  
And becomes corresponding in form to every form,  
So the one Inner Self (*antarātman*) of all things  
Is corresponding in form to every form, and yet is outside.
10. As the one wind has entered the world  
And becomes corresponding in form to every form,  
So the one Inner Self of all things  
Is corresponding in form to every form, and yet is outside.
11. As the sun, the eye of the whole world,  
Is not sullied by the external faults of the eyes,  
So the one Inner Self of all things  
Is not sullied by the evil in the world, being external to it.
12. The Inner Self of all things, the One Controller,  
Who makes his one form manifold—  
The wise who perceive Him as standing in oneself,  
They, and no others, have eternal happiness! (v.8-12)

*The world-tree rooted in Brahman; [Ways to Brahman]*

1. Its root is above, its branches below—  
This eternal fig-tree!  
That (root) indeed is the Pure. That is *Brahman*.  
That indeed is called the Immortal.  
On it all the worlds do rest,  
And no one soever goes beyond it.  
This, verily, is That!
2. This whole world, whatever there is,  
Was created from and moves in Life.  
The great fear, the upraised thunderbolt—  
They who know That, become immortal.
3. From fear of Him fire doth burn.  
From fear the sun gives forth heat.  
From fear both Indra and Wind,  
And Death as fifth, do speed along. . . .
6. The separate nature of the senses,  
And that their arising and setting  
Is of things that come into being apart [from himself],  
The wise man recognizes, and sorrows not.
9. His form is not to be beheld.  
No one soever sees Him with the eye.  
He is framed by the heart, by the thought, by the mind.  
They who know That become immortal.
10. When cease the five  
[Sense-] knowledges, together with the mind,  
And the intellect (*buddhi*) stirs not—  
That, they say, is the highest course.
11. This they consider as *yoga*—  
The firm holding back of the senses.  
Then one becomes undistracted.  
*Yoga*, truly, is the origin and the end.
12. Not by speech, not by mind,  
Not by sight can He be apprehended.  
How can He be comprehended  
Otherwise than by one's saying "He is"? . . .
13. He can indeed be comprehended by the thought "He is"  
And by [admitting] the real nature of both [his comprehensibility and his incomprehensibility].

When he has been comprehended by the thought "He is"  
His real nature manifests itself.

14. When are liberated all

The desires that lodge in one's heart,  
Then a mortal becomes immortal!  
Therein he reaches *Brahman*!

15. When are cut all

The knots of the heart here on earth,  
Then a mortal becomes immortal!

—Thus far is the instruction.

(vi.1-3, 6, 9-15)

#### 4. PRAŚNA UPANIṢAD

As the name indicates, this work has its origin in the *questions* (six in all) which philosophers ask of the sage Pippalāda. His answers evolve in the end quite a systematic philosophy on creation, human personality, and the metaphysical principle in man. This indicates that the Upaniṣad must have been a late work.

*Questioners seek the highest Brahman from a teacher*

4. To him [a questioner] then he [Pippalāda, a seer,] said: "The Lord of Creation (Prajāpati), verily, was desirous of creatures (offspring, *prajā*). He performed austerity. Having performed austerity, he produces a pair, matter (*rayi*, fem.) and life (*prāṇa*, masc.), thinking 'These two will make creatures for me in manifold ways.'"

5. The sun, verily, is life; matter, indeed, is the moon. Matter, verily, is everything here, both what is formed and what is formless. . . .

(i.4, 5)

*The Supreme Self, the ultimate basis of the manifold world and  
of the individual*

7. As birds resort to a tree for a resting-place, even so, O friend, it is to the supreme Self (*Ātman*) that everything here resorts:—<sup>1</sup>

8. Earth and the elements of earth, water and the elements of water, heat and the elements of heat, wind and the elements of wind, space and the elements of space, sight and what can be seen, hearing and what can be heard, smell and what can be smelled, taste and what can be tasted, the skin and what can be touched, speech and what can be spoken, the hands and what can be taken,

<sup>1</sup> The following is a noteworthy Sāṅkhya enumeration.—Hume.