

## Chapter 4

# The Kena and Katha Upanishads

### 4.1 The Kena Upanishad

The word *kena* means ‘by whom?’ The Upanishad is an inquiry into the nature of perception. It is a search for the real power behind the workings of the universe both external and internal. It concludes by indicating that it is the *ātman* but the way it arrives at this conclusion is worthy of detailed study.

Here is a quick translation of the entire Upanishad. The opening verse begins with some thought provoking questions. By whom does the mind go forward toward its object? Being directed by whom does the life force, *prāna*, proceed to its function? By whom impelled do the people utter their speech? What luminous force directs the eyes and ears?

The second verse gives the reply. It is the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, the speech of speech, the life of life, the eye of the eye. The wise who separate the *ātman* from the sensory functions become immortal.

The third and fourth verses are as follows. The eye cannot approach It, neither speech nor mind. We do not therefore know It, nor do we know how to teach It. It is different from what is known and It is beyond what is unknown. Thus we have heard from our teachers who taught us.

Now come verses which are not only wonderfully poetic but enable the mind to go to its own boundaries by the very inquiry. At the same time, we see

a negation of formal religion. What speech cannot reveal but what reveals speech, that is *Brahman*, not what people worship here. What mind does not comprehend, but what comprehends mind, that is *Brahman*, not what people worship here. What sight cannot see but what sees sight, that is *Brahman*, not what people worship here. What hearing cannot hear, but what hears hearing, that is *Brahman*, not what people worship here. What the sense of smell cannot reveal, but what reveals the sense of smell, that is *Brahman*, not what people worship here.

Thus far, we have in the opening verse, the student inquiring into the nature of perception. The teacher gives his answers in the subsequent verses. Having explained it in this way, the teacher says: if you think that you know *Brahman* well, then you know little indeed, for the form of *Brahman* that you see in the living beings and luminous forces is but a trifle. You should inquire further into the nature of *Brahman*. The student replies: I think I know *Brahman*.

This is an important verse that has relevance to the modern spirit of research. When we say we know something, we have put an end to our knowledge of it. Psychologically, we have closed the apertures of the mind in that direction. Our attitude may determine the extent to which we can open our sensory apparatus, including the mind, in order to gain knowledge.

But the student continues in the next verse. I do not think I know It well. Nor do I think that I do not know It. He knows It who knows that It is other than the unknown and the known. The teacher's reply is the following. He knows who knows It not. He knows It not who knows. It is unknown to the one who knows. It is known to the one who does not know.

Again, this verse is highly relevant to the modern research student. Everything around us is infinite. We cannot say that we know everything about even a grain of sand. It reminds us of the famous poem of William Blake.

*To see the world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.*

We cannot say that our knowledge of anything is complete. Even a grain of sand, or the petal of a flower seems to be infinite. In science and mathematics, it often happens that a fresh perspective can open new vistas of knowledge on aspects that humanity may deem "known" or complete.

In his essay, 'The Open Secret', Vivekananda<sup>1</sup> writes, "Whichever way we

<sup>1</sup>See S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Volume 2, p. 397-398.

turn in trying to understand things in their reality, if we analyse far enough, we find that at last we come to a peculiar state of things, seemingly a contradiction: something which our reason cannot grasp and yet is a fact. We take up something - we know it is finite; but as soon as we begin to analyse it, it leads us beyond our reason, and we never find an end to all its qualities, its possibilities, its powers, its relations. It has become infinite. Take even a common flower, that is finite enough; but who is there that can say he knows all about the flower? There is no possibility of anyone's getting to the end of the knowledge about that one flower. The flower has become infinite - the flower which was finite to begin with. Take a grain of sand. Analyse it. We start with the assumption that it is finite, and at last we find that it is not, it is infinite; all the same we have looked upon it as finite. ... So with all our thoughts and experiences, ... We see we are finite beings. ... What is true of the flower, of the grain of sand, of the physical world, and of every thought, is a hundredfold more true of ourselves. We are also in the same dilemma of existence, being finite and infinite at the same time. ... When we want to grasp ourselves, we cannot - we have become the infinite. ... Everything in this life is so vast that the intellect is nothing in comparison with it. ... 'We ourselves' - this is the greatest mystery of the universe."

From the standpoint of *Brahman*, the meaning of the verse is that he who thinks he knows *Brahman* has a conception in his mind. Since no conception can capture all of *Brahman*, the individual really cannot say he knows It.

The Upanishad continues by giving a means to realise *Brahman*. He who is aware of It through every pulsation of knowing gains immortality. The *ātman* is the source of strength and vigour and through its awareness, we gain immortality. For one who has realised it here and now, there is true life. For one who has not, great is the loss. Discovering the *ātman* in every being, the wise become immortal.

In these verses, we must understand the meaning of immortality. The reference is to the transcendence of life and death, of change. By realizing the *ātman* we enter the dimension of the unchanging, eternal and thus become immortal.

Now that the sage has imparted to the student the fundamental teaching, he proceeds in the next two sections to illustrate the idea through a story. The story goes that *Brahman* obtained victory for the *devas*, the luminous energies. Though the victory was due to *Brahman*, the *devas* became elated by it and thought, 'This victory is ours, the glory is ours.' *Brahman* came to know of their vanity and It appeared before them. But they did not understand what appeared before them. The *devas* asked Agni to go and investigate. Agni hastened to That. It asked, "who are you?" Agni replied, "I am Fire, I can burn anything."

That Being then said, “Can you burn this blade of grass?” Agni roused up its enthusiasm and energy but could not burn the blade of grass. He returned to the *devas* and told them he could not fathom That. The *devas* asked Vayu to go and determine what That is. Vayu went and on being asked “who are you?” replied, “I am *mātarisvan*, the life force. I can blow away anything.” That Being then said, “Can you blow away this blade of grass?” Vayu then roused up its full force to blow away the blade of grass but could not do so. He returned to the *devas* and told them he could not fathom That. Then the *devas* asked Indra to investigate. When Indra went, That disappeared and in that spot appeared a luminous female form, *Umā*, daughter of the snow-clad mountains. Indra asked her, “Who was That?” She replied, “That was *Brahman*. It was through victory of *Brahman* that you achieved your glory.” Through the words of *Umā*, Indra understood That was *Brahman*. Agni, *Vāyu* and Indra excel the *devas* since they approached *Brahman*. Indra excels the others since he was the first to know That as *Brahman*.

With these verses the allegorical story is complete. Neither Agni, *Vāyu* or Indra are able to understand It. Indra however does not see That, but rather *Umā*. Recall that Indra is that power which controls the sense organs, namely, the power of the mind. *Umā* is the combined wisdom of the sages, here symbolised by the snow-clad mountains, the meditative retreat of the philosophers of that age.

The teacher continues. This is the teaching regarding That. It is like a flash of lightning or the wink of an eye. This is with reference to Its’ aspect as cosmic manifestation.

This verse is important because it indicates that knowledge of *Brahman* can be gained through the study of external nature but the perception of That is momentary like a flash of lightning or the wink of an eye. The next verse indicates that through the mind, the experience lasts longer.

The manifestation of That in the human being can be perceived inwardly by the mind. *Brahman* can be remembered and imagined as being nearer than the near in every particle of time. *Brahman* is called the adorable One. It can be meditated upon in that way.

What other relation can we have to That which manifests as energy in the human being and is responsible for all the vital processes since the moment of our conception? In this verse, we get a practical method to contemplate *Brahman*, namely, by being constantly aware of the workings of the mind (Indra), the Life Principle (*Vāyu*) and the Fire Principle (Agni) for their workings are due to the power of *Brahman*.

Now comes a rather humorous dialogue. The student has just been taught by the teacher. And the student asks, “Sir, please teach me what is called the Upanishad.” The teacher replies, “I have just taught you the Upanishad. I have just imparted to you the knowledge of *Brahman*.”

Here, *upanishad* is to be interpreted as inner knowledge. The student has not understood and so asks the teacher to teach it again! The patient teacher continues. Of the Upanishad, *tapas* (concentration of energies of the mind and the senses), *damah* (self-restraint) and *karma* (dedicated work) form the foundation. The Vedas are its limbs. Truth is its abode. One who realises That is liberated from ignorance and becomes established in That. Yes, he becomes established in That.

In summary, the Kena Upanishad compels us to inquire how it is that we perceive anything. It confronts us with fundamental questions about the mystery of perception and finally indicates the mystery of ourselves. It concludes by saying that mystery is *Brahman*. It cannot be said to be known since we cannot objectify It. Nor can it be said to be unknown since we experience It every moment, nay, It is the cause of our experience. Thus It is more than the known and the unknown.

## 4.2 The Katha Upanishad

The Katha Upanishad is a dialogue between a young boy named Naciketas and Yama, the “God of Death.” It gained some popularity in the 19th century when Edwin Arnold gave a free style translation of it and published it under the title ‘The Secret of Death.’ Some of you may have also heard of Somerset Maugham’s ‘The Razor’s Edge’. The title is taken from a verse in the Katha Upanishad.

The Upanishad opens in the form of a story with the father of Naciketas performing a seemingly meritorious act of giving sacrificial gifts, where his most valued possessions were given away. We are to infer that his father was performing the sacrifice grudgingly when Naciketas approached his father and asked him, ‘To whom shall you give me?’ At first, the father ignored his son’s question, but being asked a second and third time, he replied in a fit of short temper, ‘I give you unto Death.’ So the boy went to Yama, the God of Death and waited there three days since Yama was not home. When Yama returned and found Naciketas waiting, he said to him, ‘I am sorry I was not home and you have waited here three days without food or shelter. To make up for it, I shall offer you three boons.’ So Naciketas said that his first boon is that his father have peace of mind. Yama said, ‘So be it.’ His second boon was to understand the nature of the religious sacrifice his father was performing, probably current at

that time, that people thought enabled them to go to heaven.

In explaining this part of the Upanishad and commenting generally on the notion of 'heaven' found in many cultures, Vivekananda writes<sup>2</sup> "Now we have seen that the oldest idea which we got in the Samhita portion of the Vedas was only about heaven where they had bright bodies and lived with the fathers. Gradually other ideas came, but they were not satisfying; there was still need for something higher. Living in heaven would not be very different from life in this world. At best, it would only be a very healthy rich man's life, with plenty of sense-enjoyments and a sound body which knows no disease. It would be this material world, only a little more refined; and we have seen the difficulty that the external material world can never solve the problem. So no heaven can solve the problem. If this world cannot solve the problem, no multiplication of this world can do so, because we must always remember that matter is only an infinitesimal part of the phenomena of nature. The vast part of phenomena which we actually see is not matter. For instance, in every moment of our life what a great part is played by thought and feeling, compared with the material phenomena outside! How vast is this internal world with its tremendous activity! The sense phenomena are very small compared with it. The heaven solution commits this mistake; it insists that the whole of phenomena is only in touch, taste, sight, etc. So this idea of heaven did not give full satisfaction to all. Yet Naciketas asks, as the second boon, about some sacrifice through which people might attain to this heaven. There was an idea in the Vedas that these sacrifices pleased the gods and took human beings to heaven." So Naciketas inquired about details of this social custom of that time, and his second boon was granted.

With the third boon, the Upanishad proper begins. Naciketas asks, 'When a man dies, some say he is, others that he is not. I desire to understand the mystery of death.' Yama was surprised. He was happy to grant the other boons and so he said, 'Even the gods had doubts on this point and it is not easy to understand. Very subtle is the matter. Please choose another boon.'

Naciketas does not relent. 'You say even the gods had doubts on this point. Where will I find another teacher like you? No other boon will I have except this one!' And Yama replied, 'Please choose long life, wealth and health on this planet, heavenly maidens and many more pleasures. I will make you lord of the Earth, but please do not ask this question!' Still Naciketas does not relent. 'These things are ephemeral. Even the powers of the body wear away. Keep your damsels, song and dance. Please reveal to me the mystery of death.'

In this passage, we see what tremendous determination is needed for one

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<sup>2</sup>See S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 2, p. 158.

who wants to probe deeper. Naciketas has analysed the temporal nature of all enjoyment and has rejected it. These verses are trying to convey to us the mental and emotional attitudes with which we must approach this higher knowledge.

Now the Upanishad begins. Yama says, ‘The better, *sreyas* is one thing, and the pleasant, *preyas* quite another. Of these two, the wise choose the better rather than the pleasant and the fool chooses the pleasant. I am impressed by your desire for higher knowledge Naciketas. Many are they who living in the midst of ignorance but considering themselves wise, go round and round deluded, like the blind leading the blind. Those that think only the sensory world exists, come under my sway again and again. Even to hear of the *ātman* is not available to many; many having heard of It cannot comprehend. Wonderful is Its teacher and equally wonderful is Its pupil.’

*āscaryo vaktā kusalosya labdhā*  
*āscaryo jñātā kusalanusistah.*

Yama continues, “The *ātman* is subtler than the subtlest and beyond logic and reason. It cannot be reached by vain argumentation and discourse. The wise relinquish both joy and sorrow and develop meditation on the *ātman*, the ancient effulgent One, hard to see, very profound, hidden in experience, seated in the heart and animating this body.” At this point, Naciketas seeks further elaboration on what Yama has just taught. He asks, “You say It is beyond virtue and vice, beyond cause and effect, and different from the past, present or the future. Please explain to me That.”

Yama responds, “The goal of which the Vedas speak, the goal for which the sages practice austerities, that goal is Om. This syllable represents *Brahman*. It is the highest syllable. By meditating upon it, one gets nearer to That.”

Here we come to an important idea in Indian philosophy, namely the philosophy of the word. Yama introduces the word Om (which is pronounced like ‘om’ in ‘home’) to signify *Brahman*. To be more accurate, the ‘soundless’ aspect of Om symbolizes *Brahman*. In explaining this idea, Ranganathananda writes<sup>3</sup>, “A word and its meaning are inseparable ... History has shown that human knowledge in various fields has been greatly advanced by the invention and use of symbols. Language itself is a collection of symbols. Quantities and numbers become simplified when expressed through symbols. When ancient Indian scientific thought invented the numerals, including the zero sign, the algebraic symbols and the decimal system, it helped immensely to simplify mathematics and its handling of immense physical quantities. When the Indian sages realised

<sup>3</sup>See S. Ranganathananda, *The Message of the Upanishads*, p. 373, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Second Edition, 1971.

the Absolute and the Unconditioned in the unity of *Brahman* and *Atman*, they felt the need for an adequate symbol to communicate so incommunicable a truth ... In their search, they came across the sound symbol *Om*. ... They analysed this sound *Om* and discovered that, of all sounds, it possessed the quality of universality. It is composed of sounds of three letters of *akāra*, *ukāra*, and *makāra*. ... Hence the combination of these three sounds into *Om* is also a combination of all sounds that one can possibly utter. ... *Om* in its uttered form finally merges into its unuttered form; all uttered sound merges into the silence of the soundless. This soundless or *amātra* aspect of *Om* is the symbol of *Brahman* in its transcendental aspect, beyond time, space and causality.” Thus, *Om* is the matrix of all sounds including the ‘soundless’ aspect of sound.

Yama continues his teaching: “The *ātman* is not born nor does It die. It has not come from anything nor has anything come from It. It is unborn, eternal, ever-lasting and ancient. It is not slain when the body is slain. If the slayer thinks that he slays and the slain thinks himself slain, neither of these understand that the *ātman* does not slay nor is it slayed.”

These two verses re-appear later in the Bhagavad Gita, with minor modifications, as verses 18 and 19 in chapter 2. They have inspired many poets and thinkers. For example, the famed American philosopher and writer of the 19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson, was inspired to write his poem on Brahma and there we find an echo of these verses:

*If the red slayer thinks he slays  
Or if the slain thinks he is slain,  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep and pass and turn again.*

In the next three verses, Yama tries to explain to Naciketas the notion of the *ātman*. “It is smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, and is ever present in the heart of all creatures. One who is free from selfish desires realizes the *ātman* through a serene mind and thus becomes free from sorrow. Realizing the *ātman* as bodiless in the embodied, the changeless in the changing, infinite and all-pervading, the wise one does not grieve. This *ātman* is not known through study, nor by the intellect, nor through hearing. It is revealed to one whom It chooses to reveal itself. One who has not desisted from bad conduct, nor one whose senses are not under control, nor one whose mind is not tranquil and concentrated, can ever realise the *ātman*. ”

The last verse requires some clarification. There are some necessary conditions for the realisation of the *ātman* and these are given in the last verse. But they are not sufficient. That is the import of the penultimate verse indicating



that the *ātman* reveals itself to one who It chooses. The *ātman* is not bound by any rules.

Now Yama introduces the imagery of the chariot. “The *ātman* is the master of the chariot and the body is the chariot. Know the intellect, *buddhi* as the charioteer and the mind *manas* as the reins. The sense organs, they say, are the horses and the sense objects are roads they travel over. They call the *atman* the “enjoyer” or “experiencer” when It is united with the body, senses and the mind.

The imagery of the chariot is also used by Plato in his *Phaedrus* but the usage there is different. Plato’s chariot has only two horses and we leave it to the reader to discern how it differs from Yama’s chariot.

Yama continues, “For him who is devoid of understanding, with a mind not disciplined, the sense organs become uncontrolled like the unruly horses of the chariot. He does not reach the goal but returns to the world of birth and death again. But he who has proper understanding, mind under control, ever pure, reaches the goal.”

In the penultimate verse, we find reference to the theory of transmigration. The idea is that until the final awareness of *Brahman* is experienced, the psyche must travel through the cycle of birth and death. This theory later found its way into other philosophies and cultures, most notably, in the writings of Plato.

Now Yama organizes the bodily functions in a hierarchy. He says, “Higher than the senses are the sense objects. Higher than the sense objects is the mind. Reason or *buddhi* is higher than the mind. The *mahat* or awareness is higher than *buddhi*. Higher than the *mahat* is *avyakta*, undifferentiated nature. The infinite Self, *purusa* is greater than *avyakta* and the *purusa* is the supreme goal. There is nothing higher than This.”

In the previous verses, we may ask how can the sense objects be higher than the senses? The precise term, *artha* used in that verse refers however, not to objects visible to the eye, but their nuclear dimension, the *tanmātra* as the Vedānta philosophy later expresses it. Undifferentiated nature or *avyakta* is that which has not manifested but is said to be the combined energies of all causes and effects. *Purusa* is an alternate name for *Brahman* or *Atman*.

“The *atman* is hidden in all beings and is not manifest to all, says Yama. “But it can be realized by refined reason and inquiry. The seeker of knowledge should merge the speech in the mind, the mind in the *buddhi*, the *buddhi* in

the *mahat*, and the *mahat* in the *ātman*, the abode of Peace. Arise, awake and enlighten yourself by approaching the great teachers. The sages say the path is difficult to walk upon, as sharp as the razor's edge. By realizing That which is beyond sound, beyond touch, beyond form, imperishable, beyond taste, eternal, and beyond the sense of smell, without beginning, without end, one is liberated from the jaws of death."

Let us observe here that these verses emphasize that the *ātman* can be realized by transcending reason through inquiry. So we must not abandon reason but push it further. How to do this is learned from the teachers. Here again, the perennial tradition of how knowledge is handed down from generation to generation emphasizes the theme that only another life can transmit the instruction.

Now Yama begins a detailed exposition. "The sensory organs look outward and thus, there is a tendency to look outward and not within. A certain sage, desirous of immortality, turned his mind and senses inward, and realized the *ātman*. The childish go after external pleasures and fall into the snare of death. But the wise, seeking immortality, do not crave for things in this changing world."

Now begin a series of verses reminiscent of the poetry of the Kena Upanishad. "That by which one cognizes form, taste, smell, sound and touch. This is verily That. Having realized the *ātman* which perceives the dream and waking states, the *dhira*, sage, does not grieve. The sage realizes the *ātman* as the enjoyer, the sustainer of life, ever near, the knower of the past and the future. This is verily That. ... What indeed is here is there. What is there is here. He who sees things differently goes from death to death. By mind alone is this realization to be attained. There is no difference here at all. He who sees things differently goes from death to death."

A series of examples follow that illustrate how we are to meditate upon the *ātman*. Observe again that the instruction is by analogy. Yama says, "Just as fire is one force, but assumes various forms, so also That appears to have various forms. As the air is one but assumes various forms so also That appears to have various forms. As the sun is the eye of the whole world, is never tainted by the faults of the eyes, so also the *ātman* is not tainted by the misery of the world because It is transcendent."

After these illustrations, Yama gives the precise technique which later becomes the philosophy of *yoga*. "When the five senses are indrawn and the mind is silent, and even the *buddhi*, reason, does not stir, the sages say that is the highest state. That state is called *yoga*. The *yogi* must be vigilant, for *yoga* can be had and lost."

Yoga is the general method of concentration. Until we are established in that, we must be vigilant since concentration, as we all know, can be lost when it is not deep enough. In deep concentration, we are not so easily distracted.

Now come two verses which are extremely important. They resonate the theme of *śraddhā* or faith, which we mentioned earlier. But this faith is not a religious faith or belief but rather a two-fold faith of the genuine seeker of knowledge. This is a faith that there is order hidden in the universe and secondly, that we have the ability to discover it. This is the essence of scientific inquiry and echoes a famous utterance of Einstein, “The most incomprehensible thing about this universe is that it is comprehensible.” Yama teaches Naciketas the secret: “It cannot be attained through speech, nor through mind nor through the eye. How can It be known then apart from those sages who say, ‘It is’? Between the two views of Reality as existence and non-existence, Reality can be realized through the view of existence alone. Its transcendent nature becomes inwardly revealed to one who approaches It as existing.”

At first glance, this may seem to be a form of self-hypnosis. Yet upon closer examination, we find it is actually de-hypnosis since we are already hypnotized through social conditioning. A century ago, when Vivekananda was lecturing at Harvard University, he was asked this very question. He replied, “You are hypnotised already, and you should ... de-hypnotise yourself. ‘There the sun cannot illumine, nor the moon, nor the stars; the flash of lightning cannot illumine That, what to speak of the mortal fire! That shining, everything else shines.’ (Katha Up. 2.2.15) That is not hypnotisation, but dehypnotisation. It ... is the only system that more or less understands that hypnotism comes with every form of dualism. But the [non-dualist] says, throw away even the Vedas, throw away even the Personal God, throw away even the universe, throw away even your own body and mind, and let nothing remain, in order to get rid of hypnotism perfectly.”<sup>4</sup>

Yama concludes, “When all selfish desires that dwell in the heart are removed from their moorings, the sage becomes immortal and attains *Brahman* in this very life. When, in this very life, all the knots of the heart are rent asunder, the sage becomes immortal. This is the teaching of the Upanishad. Hundred and one are the nerves of the heart; of them, one extends to the crown of the head. Going upwards through that nerve, one gains immortality.” The reference to the nerve that ‘extends to the crown of the head’ is the *sushumna* nerve that later reappears in the yoga philosophy of Patanjali that we will discuss in subsequent chapters.

The Upanishad ends with the following verse: “Receiving this teaching from

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<sup>4</sup>S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 5, p. 303-304.

Yama, Naciketas became free from death and attained *Brahman*. So will others who also realise the *ātman* within.”