

NACHIKETA



Vedic sacrifices differ from one another in that they have different objectives for its aim “conquest of the whole world”, as its name itself indicates. But complete victory lies in complete renunciation. The performer of this sacrifice should give away all his wealth.

Vajasrawas, a householder of the Upanishadic period, was performing this great sacrifice. It was a unique occasion. The sacrificial hall was decorated in great splendor. The rishis, ranged in rows, were chanting the mantras while pouring the prescribed offering into the holy fire. The assembled guests gave color and charm to the scene. It looked as though the Devas were visibly present to receive the devotional offerings.

Vajasrawas had a son named Nachiketa, who was about seven years old. At the end of the sacrifice, Vajasrawas gave away cows to the teachers, sages and saints, who had come from all over the land. As he started gifting the cows one by one, his little son Nachiketa came and stood by his father’s side. He was surprised to see his father making a gift only old cow, cows which were unable even to walk properly and those which were incapable of giving any milk. Nachiketa felt that by this mean act of his, his father would not get the desired result of the sacrifice.

Nachiketa approached his father and asked him, “To whom do you propose to give me as a gift?” The father did not pay any heed to the boy’s question. But, the boy was importunate. He repeated his question three or four times. He became angry and said brusquely, “I give you to Yama, the God of Death.”

Vajasrawas did not seriously mean what he said. Which father would send his son away to the land of death? The words were uttered only in a mood of annoyance and anger. But, the damage had been done. Nachiketa had decided to obey the words of his father by

going to the abode of Yama. He felt that if his father was dear to him, truth was even dearer. He did not wish to abandon truth. Vajasrawas, blind with fury, did not think of the consequences of what he had uttered. When he calmed down, he felt unhappy. But, it was too late. He might grieve as father, but what was done could not be undone. Nachiketa prepared himself to go to the abode of Yama. Vajasrawas began persuading his little son to stay back. He said, "My son, you should not you should not mind what I said in anger. In a fit of anger I spoke harshly to you, but you should not take it seriously."

But Nachiketa was very firm. Folding his hands he said to his father, "Dear father, I was told by you that our ancestors never went back on their words. I would like you also to be true to your word and thus continue this sacred tradition. O my father, I do not want to disobey your orders under any circumstances."

The pursuit of truth is the gateway to heaven. Except for truth, all other earthly beings, men, animals and plants grow, ripen and die. Life is transitory and death triumphs over life. I am not afraid of death. At this moment, you should remember your ancestors, how they did their sacred duty and honoured truth. As you know, unbecoming acts are done only by selfish people. Let us conduct ourselves in such a way as to gain the approval of the wise."

Vajasrawas, though grieving as a father would, gave him permission as a sage and seeker of truth. Young Nachiketa eagerly sought the abode of Yama in order to fulfill the words of his father. Reaching there, Nachiketa found that Yama was not at home. There seemed to be none to welcome him. For three days and nights the young boy waited without food or sleep at the doorstep of Yama's abode.

Yama, on his return, was deeply grieved for this breach of the code of hospitality. He received Nachiketa with the reverence that is due to a guest. By way of atonement for having kept him waiting for three days, Yama offered Nachiketa three boons. He said, "Dear child, you have been kept waiting long at my door. You are a brahmin boy and lover of God. I am exceedingly unhappy over this unintentional mistake. I shall grant you three boons."

Nachiketa said, "O Sir, as the first boon, I seek the welfare of my father. He also should receive me warmly when I return." Nachiketa specially mentioned this, because, ordinarily, mortals cannot recognise spirits. To the world Nachiketa was dead.

Yama granted the first boon and heaved a sign of relief.

Nachiketa asked for the second boon, "Sir! I desire to know how one could reach heaven where there is no sorrow, old age or death."

Nachiketa asked this boon not for himself but for the sake of suffering humanity. He wanted that everyone should learn this secret knowledge and free themselves from the sufferings of this worldly life.

Yama was pleased with the unselfishness and broad-mindedness of Nachiketa. He gave the boy full details of a particular sacrifice, the performance of which would take one to heaven.

As Nachiketa was endowed with a spiritual outlook and a bright intellect and was pure and sincere, he comprehended at once all that was taught. Yama was pleased with his disciple and, in appreciation, named that particular sacrifice after Nachiketa himself.

Then came the last boon. Nachiketa asked, “Revered Sir, what happens to a man after death? When he dies there arises a doubt; some say, ‘He exists, Others say, ‘He does not’. I should like to know the truth from you. This I ask for the third boon.”

Yama had not anticipated this. He did not expect that a boy of such tender years would raise such a major metaphysical question. Yama wanted to test the mental caliber of the boy before answering this. He parried and tried to divert the boy from seeking an answer to the awkward question. He bade him ask for something else instead. He said, “Nachiketa, on this point even the gods have had doubts. Very subtle is the subject and hard indeed to understand. So ask for some other boon.” But, Nachiketa was resolute. He said, “You say even the gods had their doubt. But, I cannot find a better teacher than you. So please do teach me.”

Although Yama was pleased within himself, he still wished to divert the attention of the boy by holding out before him all kinds of attractive objects with which ordinary men enjoy themselves. He pointed to him all the good things of life, such as wealth, youth, beauty and whatever else satisfy the senses. But Nachiketa declined all these firmly. To him, they were merely sensual pleasures. The very fact that he had met Yama himself was in itself a guarantee that there would be no lack of the good things of life. So, he remained firm in his resolve. All that he sought was the Supreme Knowledge, which would throw light on life’s great problem. Yama was highly pleased with such a young truth-seeker. He said, “Nachiketa, you are indeed fortunate. You have chosen the path of virtue, and rejected the path of enjoyment. Only, the wise choose this path which leads to liberation.

Listen attentively so that you may distinguish the Self or Atman from the body and the mind.” Then Yama taught him the knowledge of the Atman, realising which man attains immortality.

This forms the subject matter of one of the Upanishads called Katha Upanishad.