

## Value Considerations in the *Kathopanisad*

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**Abstract**

*The social relevance of philosophy and specially the Upanisadic philosophy has been challenged at various quarters. Some scholars treat that Upanisads are nothing but metaphorical poems and those may have literary importance but be philosophically insignificant. Such an understanding about Upanisads appears to be very much casual. The Upanisads are not silent in respect of dealing with the values of life and mankind. In this respect the paper unfolds the value considerations of the Kathopanisad.*

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Very often the social relevance of philosophy and specially the Upanisadic philosophy has been challenged at various quarters. Some scholars have given the opinion that Upanisads are nothing but metaphorical poems and may have literary importance but philosophically insignificant. Such an understanding about Upanisads appears to be very much casual and product of the inappropriate understanding of the Upanisads. A renowned scholar, Swamy Ranganathananda writes that “Among the Upanisads the *Katha Upanisad* stands in a category all alone. It blends in itself the charm of poetry the strength of philosophy and the depth of mysticism; it contains a more unified exposition of the spiritual insights of Vedanta than is found in any other single Upanisad.”<sup>1</sup>. Here Swamiji seems to have emphasized on the philosophy of spiritualism and mysticism to be main philosophical aspect of this Upanisad. I do not disagree with him but my submission is that this Upanisad is not silent in respect of dealing with the values of life and mankind. Rather the main purpose of the Upanisad seems to appraise the importance of the human values and higher knowledge for human beings. The expression in the fashion of poems or verses was the style of the time. In this perspective, an examination of the views of this most popular Upanisad, that is, *Kathopanisad* and its socio-philosophic relevance has been done.

*Kathopanisad* is well known for imparting the higher knowledge through the dialogue between Nachiketa and Yama (The Lord of the death) where both of them can be taken as representing an inquisitive knowledge seeker student and a highly learned teacher. The second and third questions (boons) of Nachiketa were of such nature that it appears as if those cannot be answered without taking shelter of mysticism or mystical elements. It is seen that sometimes the intensity of the higher knowledge is accepted on the ground of its high mysticism and when it is far from the grasping level of the common man. Very often the upanisadic explanations are found with rich metaphors. Scholars while commenting on such expressions make those further complicated so that it remains far away from common man’s understanding. That is why upanisadic knowledge is very often treated as not meant for common man. But in what follows we shall see how the questions of Naciketa are very much connected with human inquisitiveness and the answers of the Lord of the death are also helpful for the knowledge of the common man. Neither the questions nor the answers are obscure or mystical. Rather there has been proper emphasis on values in different manners.

The Upanisad is very rich in respect of dealing with the values of life and mankind. There has been maximum emphasis on acquisition of the proper knowledge and recommendations for the cultivation of the values like sacrifice, *dana*, *shreyas*, *preyas*, and also the *parama purusartha*. It shows that not only the Upanisad is

philosophically important but also socially very much relevant. In this context it may be further pointed out that during Upanisadic days vidya was treated as to be of two types, namely, *para vidya* and *apara vidya* with which a common man need not be interested. But that vidya which was open for all was considered as *paravidya*. It constitutes the knowledge pertaining to empirical world. Since upanisadic knowledge was treated to be *aparavidya* or the higher knowledge it was not open for all. On the ground that the upanisadic knowledge is not open for all, the Upanisads might have been considered as in no way required by the social beings and treated as unnecessary for social living. But this view would be highly a misconception about the Upanisads or upanisadic knowledge.

The Upanisads contain *aparavidya* does not imply that those lack any other knowledge which would be helpful for common man and the society. In this perspective, point out that the Upanisads are also imparting such messages which are highly helpful for the smooth functioning of the society. In this context, it may be pointed out that pursuing after values are always very much necessary for common man and for social harmony and the Upanisads have contributed significantly in this regard. In order to establish this view an attempt has been made to deal with the value considerations of this Upanisad, that is, *Kathopanishad*.

As second boon, Naciketa was interested to know (*sa tvam agnim svargyam*).<sup>2</sup> It means Naciketa was interested to know the method of the attainment of the heaven (*svargaprapti*). Those who consider that Upanisads embrace mysticism they would like to point out that '*svarga*' is a mystical concept and *svargaprapti* is a myth. But it is important to know the intention of the questioner asking such a question. In the following verse<sup>3</sup> *svarga* has been explained as '*anantaloka*' or the infinite world. Here it is important to know in what sense '*svarga*' has been conceived as the infinite world? It is known that Nachiketa wanted to point out in this world there are full of limitations. Is there any possibility of overcoming such limitations? For example, in this world there is the limit in the longevity and there are sufferings, miseries, diseases, etc. and this world is not free from all these problems. Naciketa asserts the *svargaloka* is free from earthly problems like fear, disease, old age, pain, hunger, death, etc..<sup>4</sup> Naciketa wanted to know the means of the attainment of such infinite world (*anantaloka*).

The teacher in his reply says supreme peace is available (*santim atyantam iti*) by following three instructions and three duties. It is that knowledge which helps in the attainment of the *svarga*. It is very much important to know what are the three instructions to be followed thrice or what are the three duties to be performed? It is

to be observed thrice means it refers to the three stages like heard, studied and practiced. Similarly, the three instructions to be received from three important sources of knowing, are father, mother and teacher or perception, inference and valid testimony. And the three duties are to be performed refers to the study of scriptures, performance of sacrifice and giving alms. This shows that the advice of the Lord of the death refers to such things which are treated as values which human beings perform in order to attain higher goal of life. Here the emphasis has been attached on obtaining wisdom and performance of *dana* and *yajnas*. These are highly needed for human beings for themselves as well as for a good society. It shows that the author of the Upanisad was more concerned to emphasize on the values like wisdom, *dana*, *yajna* than on any mystical element like *svarga*. The emphasis on values in the *Kathopanisad*, found to be much more significant when the teacher, Yama found Naciketa to be most suitable to receive the knowledge. Yama started his answer by telling him the consequences of adhering to *sreyas* and *preyas*. The opening verse of the chapter two of the part one of the Upanisad deals with concepts of *sreya* and *preya*. He has pointed out that wise man know the difference between choosing *sreyas* and *preyas* for their living. Both *sreyas* and *preyas* influence man in various ways. Only intelligent and noble (*sadhu*) people choose *sreya* in order to obtain higher goal of the life. But others choose *preyas* for the sake of their growth and development remain away from their goal.

It shows that the *Kathopanisadic* message is that if someone chooses the *sreyas*, the preferable, he has opted for a moral choice. It involves the consideration of 'ought'. Here one uses his conscience in support of the moral choice. There has been no importance on immediate gains. The goals of the life are not to run after the pleasant articles because such pleasure cannot have a long standing effect. For good life *sreya* is important.

Mostly creating interest for material goods and wealth are treated as opting for *preyas*. These are pragmatically valuable. These are also human necessities. So these are also treated as instrumental values. *Kathopanisadic* message is that for the day to day living pragmatically *preyas* are necessary and those influence man. But man must have control over himself to achieve the higher goal of life. Thus *Kathopanisad* teaches what is morally significant and what is hedonistically important. It is very much clear that in *Kathopanisad* there has been sufficient indication for the value preference. From the stand point of the knowledge on values of life the Upanisad is very much important.

The Vedas and the Upanisads are primarily treated as religious texts. Obviously they are interpreted and discussed in rich theological backgrounds. Some

scholars try to attach emphasis on its philosophical aspects. For example, in respect of Katha Upanisad Swami Ranganathananda points out that “the answer to this question (the third boon) given in the Katha Upanisad lifts the subject from sacrifices and rituals to the high level of moral striving and spiritual realization. This little difference makes all the difference between a hedonistic heaven centred theology and a spiritual character-building philosophy.”<sup>5</sup>

At the end it is further point out that this Upanisad is not silent about the *parama purusartha* of the four fold value scheme of the Indian tradition. *Moksa* or *mukti* is accepted as the highest *purusartha* in the order of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksa*. One of the fundamental characteristics of obtaining the *moksa* is that the liberated being is free from rebirth. Moreover, the being is also free from the fear of the death. It is seen that *Kathopanisad* is very much clear in suggesting the way how remaining without having the fear for the death as well as how rebirth will not be possible. In this context the view of the verse 2.1.10 or 11 of the *Kathopanisad* is very clear. It has been said that he moves from death to death (*mrtyh sa mrtyum gachhati*), he who sees the differences. The diversity between the manifested and the unmanifested or the Brahman and whatever has come out of it does not exist. (*Neha nanasti kinchana*).

Any one who finds the difference he still continues in ignorance. Because of this ignorance he has to move from ‘death to death’. Here the expression ‘death to death’ stands for facing many lives or undergoing rebirth for many times. So it has been made clear that the right knowledge of unity will stop moving from death to death or facing rebirth. That means the right knowledge is the means for liberation which is a higher value.

Further it can be pointed out that the importance of the higher value *moksa* is emphasized while giving the categorical reply to the third boon of Naciketa. The question is that ‘What happens to the self after this ‘death of life?’ was answered in the manner that ‘some souls enter into the womb to have a body’ other proceed to motionless in accordance to their deeds and according to their knowledge’.<sup>6</sup> The rebirth takes place according to the deeds performed by the being. He may further get a human life or may get a plant life according to the deeds performed by him. But if he obtains the right knowledge then he becomes free from the rebirth.

Lastly, the concluding portion of the Upanisad constitutes the essence of the entire Upanisad in the following manner. Emphasizing on the higher value for the mankind, it has been explained that “if one is able to realize (that Brahman) here before the fall of the body, (he becomes free from the bondage of the world); (if

not) one has to take body (again) in the world of creation.<sup>7</sup> Thus man becomes free and attains immortality (*muchyat Yanturamrtatva*)<sup>8</sup> by knowing the ultimate reality. This explanation of the *Kathopanisad* clearly shows that the sole aim of the Upanisad is to appraise man about the higher value of the life that is the highest knowledge. It helps in the attainment of the immortality. So from the standpoint of value considerations *Kathopanisad* is very much significant. For this reason the social relevance of the Upanisad cannot be ignored.

### References

- 1 Swamy Ranganathananda, *The Message of the Upanisads*, *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay*, p,268.
- 2 Kathopanisad, 1.1.13
- 3 Ibid, 1.1.14
- 4 Ibid, 1.1.12
- 5 Op.cit (1),,.....p,269
- 6 Op.cit (2), 2.2.7
- 7 Ibid, 2.3.4
- 8 Ibid, 2.3.8