

Kena Upaniṣad
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The *Kena Upaniṣad* is also known as the *Talavakāra Upaniṣad*. It belongs to the *Sāma Veda*. *Talavakāra* is the name of the *Brāhmaṇa* of the *Sāma Veda* to which this *Upaniṣad* belongs. The name of the *Upaniṣad* comes from the first word of this *Upaniṣad*, *kena*. It has four chapters known as *khandas*. The first two chapters are in verse and describe Brahman as essentially unknowable and inexpressible. The final two chapters are in prose and show how the gods and their powers have come from Brahman.

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Chapter 1 (First Khanda)

(The question)

- What is it that drives the mind? What keeps it going?¹
What is it that initiates the first breath?
What is it that drives the world to speech?
What god engages the eye and the ear?

(The answer)

2. It is the hearing of hearing, the thinking of thought, the speaking of speech, the breathing of breath, and the seeing of sight.²

Becoming free from these, the wise leave this world and become immortal.

3. Sight cannot see it; speech cannot describe it, nor can the mind think it.
We do not know and we do not understand how this can even be taught.

¹ The first three lines of this verse begin with the word, "*kena*", which may be translated as "by what", or also "by who". The first sentence, therefore, could be translated, "**who** drives the mind", and so forth.

²The Sanskrit says *śrotrasya śrotram, manaso mano yat...* *Śrotra* can be both the ear or the act of hearing. Similarly *manaso* can be both the mind and the act of thinking. So the translation could also read, "that which is the ear of the ear, that which is the mind of the mind" etc. The first approach better answers the question, "What or who drives the mind, etc."

4. Indeed, it is something that cannot be known. It is even above what is knowable. This we have heard from the ancients, who have explained it.
5. That which cannot be expressed with speech, which is the foundation of speech, know that as *Brahman*. Not this that people ordinarily regard.
6. That which cannot be thought, which they say is the foundation of thought, know that as *Brahman*. Not this that people ordinarily regard.
7. That which cannot be seen with the eye, which is the foundation of seeing, know that as *Brahman*. Not this that people ordinarily regard.
8. That which cannot be heard with the ear, which is the foundation of hearing, know that as *Brahman*. Not this that people ordinarily regard.
9. That which breathes not with breath, which is the foundation of breath, know that as *Brahman*. Not this that people ordinarily regard.

Chapter 2 (Second *Khanda*)

1. Teacher: If you think, "I know *Brahman* well," only slightly do you know It. Indeed, you know only the outer appearance of *Brahman*, as it pertains to yourself and to the gods.³ So you must reflect upon what you do not know.
2. Student: I do not think, "I know It well," nor do I know, "I do not know It." The person amongst us, who knows it, only thinks he knows it. He does not know, "I know It not."
3. Teacher: It is only understood by one who does not understand It. The person who thinks he understands It, knows It not. It is not understood by those who think they understand It. It is only understood by those who do not understand It.
4. It is known by an awakening⁴; only in that way can it be understood. Truly, one then finds immortality. Through the body and mind⁵ one finds power, but through knowledge⁶ one finds immortality.
5. While living in this world if one knows it, then there is truth⁷. If one does not know it while living here, then it is a great loss. Seeing it in every being, the wise, on departing this world become immortal and joyful.

³Which is to say, "the outer world."

⁴ Here the word is *pratibhodha*, an awakening or insight.

⁵ Here the word is *ātman*, which I have translated as body or mind, but it could also be rendered as a reflexive pronoun, own's self.

⁶ Here the word is *vidyā*, knowledge or philosophy.

⁷ Here the word is *satya*, which I have rendered as *sat-ya*, realness. It's more common meaning is truth.

Chapter 3 (Third *Khanda*)⁸

1 Indeed, *brahman*⁹ won a victory for the gods. The gods celebrated the victory of *brahman* and amongst themselves thought, "Truly this is our victory, we are great!"

2. *Brahman* knew this and appeared before them, but they could not understand what it was. They said, "What wonderful thing¹⁰ is this?"

3. They said to Fire, "Oh Jātavedas, find out what this wonderful thing is."

"So be it."

4. Fire ran to *brahman*. It spoke to him, "Who are you? I am Fire, I am Jātavedas," he said.

5. Brahman inquired, "What power do you have?"

He replied, "I can burn everything on this earth."

6. It placed some straw before him, "Burn that!"

He went at it with all speed, but he could not burn it. Thereupon he returned saying, "I have not been able to find out what this wonderful thing is."

7. Then they said to the wind, Oh Vāyu, "Find out what this wonderful thing is".

"So be it"

8. The wind ran towards it and it spoke to him, "Who are you?"

"I am the wind, Vāyu, I am Mātariṣvan."

9. "What power do you have?"

The wind replied, "I can carry off everything in this world."

10. It put a straw before him and said, "Carry that off!"

⁸ Stylistically the *Kenopaniṣad* is divided into two parts, the verse part (chapters 1 and two) and the prose part (chapters 3 and 4). This is the beginning of the prose part.

⁹ The word, *brahman* is neuter, and although the word is used as a person this is not to be construed with the creator god, Brahmā. The reference here is to the impersonal "force", *brahman*.

¹⁰ *Yakṣa*, a spirit, a ghost, an apparition.

He went at it with all speed, but he was not able to carry it off. Thereupon the wind returned saying, "I have not been able to find out what this wonderful thing is."

11. They then said to Indra, "Oh Maghavan, find out what this wonderful thing is."

"So be it."

He ran towards It, but it disappeared from him.

12. Then in the sky¹¹ it came upon a woman of exceeding beauty called Umā, the daughter of the mountain.¹² Indra said to her, "Who is this wonderful beauty?"

Chapter 4 (Fourth *Khanda*)

1. "It is *Brahman*," she said. "Rejoice in the victory of *Brahman*". Thereupon, he understood: "It is *Brahman*."

2. Therefore, Agni, Vāyu, and Indra surpass, as it were, the other gods for they got close to It, and they were the first to realize: "It is *brahman*."

3. Indeed, Indra surpasses even the other gods because he got closest to it and he was the first first to realize: "It is *brahman*."

4. "Here is a teaching in this regard: The flash of the lightning in the sky that causes one to blink and say, "Ah!"— that Ah is Divinity¹³!"

5. Now, regarding oneself¹⁴: That which comes to the mind in a flash of insight,¹⁵ that burst of understanding,¹⁶ that is *Brahman*!

¹¹ *ākāṣa* : sky, space

¹² Haimvatī, daughter of Himavat, a mountain.

¹³ *adhidaiva*, *adhi*: as a prefix to verbs and nouns used to express "over" and "above"; *daiva*: relating to *deva*, a god, divinity, divine power or will, fate. In BG (8/4) *adhidaiva* is defined as *puruṣa*, the universal person.

¹⁴ *Adhyātma*: in the *Bhagavad Gita* 8/3 this word is defined as *svabhāva*, one individual nature.

¹⁵ *Upasmarati*: literally remembers.

¹⁶ *Sankalpa*: a mental intention or idea in the mind.

6. The longing for this¹⁷ should be sought.¹⁸ All beings yearn for one who knows *brahman*.

7. Oh Sir, please tell me the sacred teaching.¹⁹

This sacred teaching has been already explained. Indeed, we have told you the sacred teaching of *brahman*.

8. Austerity, self restraint, and work are the foundation of this mystic doctrine. The Vedas are its limbs. Truth is its abode.

9. One who truly knows this mystic doctrine, upon striking off all evil, becomes established in the most excellent, endless, heavenly world. Indeed he thrives and he prospers!

Here ends *Kenopaniṣad*

¹⁷ The expression here is *tad-vana*, which is obscure. *Tad* is "that", and *vana* in its primary meaning is "a forest" or "wood". This makes no obvious sense, so many commentators derive the word *vana* from *vāñch*, meaning to desire. This makes contextual sense. So I have translated *tad-vana* as "longing for this." The intended sense is that a desire to know *Brahman* is the greatest thing in life.

¹⁸ *upasāritavya*: to be honored or attended upon.

¹⁹ *upaniṣad*, mystic teaching