

## GURU SHISHYA PARAMPARA: RELEVANCE OF YAMA AND NACHIKETA STORY IN THE PRESENT EDUCATION SYSTEM



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### ABSTRACT

*The Guru-Shishya Parampara (teacher-student tradition) has long been a foundational pillar of Indian education. The success of the ancient education system was due to the strong, unbreakable relationship between the Guru (teacher) and the shishya (disciple). The lack of this is the most critical factor in educational ruin in modern India. This paper examines the significance of the guru-shishya parampara as mentioned in the ancient scripture, the Katha Upanishad, and identifies the pedagogical values primarily through the dialogue between Yama, the teacher, and Nachiketa, the disciple. To gather relevant data, both the primary source (in this case, the Katha Upanishad) and the secondary sources (the articles and analyses by other authors) are used. Data are treated through content analysis. The key pedagogical values are patience, self-inquiry, high moral standards, and an insatiable quest for knowledge. Nachiketa's qualities of persistence and mentorship of Yama embody a transformative learning process. It was grounded in value-based guidance. In contrast, today's education systems often focus more on academic success and career skills, while usually neglecting moral and emotional development. By analysing pedagogical methods such as the question-and-answer method, the lecture method, and value-based learning in the Yama-Nachiketa dialogue, this study advocates reviving ancient educational principles alongside modern practices. It proposes embracing Shreya's enduring values (the good), not Preya's (the pleasant). This will help in transforming education into a more humane and ethically rooted system.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The *Guru-Shishya Parampara* is a defining aspect of the Indian education system. It represents a holistic approach to learning that integrates intellectual, ethical, and spiritual growth (Sharma, 2025). "It is a profound relationship built on trust, respect, and a deep sense of dedication" (Srenade Team, 2023, para 2). This relationship has a long-standing history in India, dating back to ancient times (Bisht, 2024). This Parampara has developed over time from its origins to the present day. Nonetheless, its fundamental themes remain unchanged, such as the *Guru* (teacher) serving as a mentor and a beacon of values, morality, and wisdom (Dhar, 2025). Education is incomplete without the guidance of a mentor or teacher. The connection between the *Guru* and education is akin to the relationship between body and Soul. Just as the body cannot exist without the Soul, education likewise holds no significance without a teacher (Bisht, 2024), and the *Shishya* (pupil) is a part of this system. In this context, a *Shishya* is like wet clay, and the *Guru* shapes it. This tradition is an enduring educational model embedded in Indian civilisation. Where education evolves from mere transactions to profound transformations. We see numerous examples from the Vedas, Upanishads, and other ancient scriptures that provide rich information about this dynamic tradition (Sharma, 2025; Prashar & Malhotra, 2024; Pal & Chakrabarti, 2024), such as the Katha Upanishad and the Yama-Nachiketa tale.

The Katha Upanishad is one of the principal Upanishads among the *Dasopanishads* (ten Upanishads) of India (Jijeesh, 2021). It has two central characters, namely, Yama and Nachiketa. The Upanishad is a conversational interaction between these two enlightened beings. Here, Yama symbolises a deep spiritual quest, intellectual courage, and moral integrity. This story explores core themes of life and death, the *Atman* (Self), and *Brahman* (ultimate reality), portraying Nachiketa as a genuine seeker of truth rather than merely a student. Meanwhile, Yama appears not only as a teacher but also

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as a compassionate guide offering profound metaphysical wisdom to a deserving disciple (Gupta, 2018). However, the present education system and teacher-student relationships have evolved into a more secular, pragmatic approach. This education system stresses academic success and preparing students for careers, with teachers mainly concentrating on delivering the curriculum and helping students prepare for examinations (Mohan, 2011). Both government and private schools provide diverse access to education, but often focus more on academic achievement than on overall development. This shift illustrates broader societal trends and the impact of global educational standards, moving away from the hierarchical, spiritually centred *Guru-Shishya* tradition toward a more egalitarian, career-oriented educational environment (Nair, 2014). Contemporary teaching methods now include various techniques, such as digital tools and standardised tests, marking a move away from the traditional oral and immersive learning approaches of the old system. Despite these developments, the enduring impact of the ancient system underscores the core values of respect and knowledge sharing, which continue to shape modern education.

## DISCUSSIONS

### Overview: The Yama-Nachiketa Narrative in the Katha Upanishad

The Katha Upanishad begins with a dramatic scene involving a ten-year-old boy named Nachiketa. He sees his father, Vajashravasa, performing a fire-sacrifice for personal gain. He repeatedly questions his father about the insincere nature of his sacrificial offerings. After that, he sees his father donating old, unproductive cattle to people who are present in his house. According to the rule of sacrifice, the sage must donate everything valuable. Nachiketa knew that he was the most valuable to his father. Seeing this, he asked his father, "Who did you give me to?" In anger, he curses Nachiketa to "go to Yama". Then, determined, Nachiketa travels to the realm of death (Yama). When he arrived at the house of the God of death, he saw that Yama was not at home. He waited for three days without food and water until Yama appeared. The God of Death (Yama) came to his home and heard about him. He was impressed by Nachiketa's patience and austerity. He said, "You are waiting for me without taking anything". In the Sanatan tradition, when someone comes to your home, you are supposed to show them care and hospitality as if they were your guest (*Aatithi Devo Bhavo*). So, Yama offers him three boons for the three days of waiting. In reply, Nachiketa wanted his father to 'calm down when he sees him' as his first boon. As a second boon, he wishes to acquire knowledge of the fire-sacrifice that leads to heaven. Finally, he asked the most profound question as his third boon: "What happens after death"? After hearing this question, Yama initially tries to dissuade Nachiketa by offering cattle, jewellery, lands, kingship, long life, and pleasures instead. However, he declined all of Yama's offers, saying they were temporary. Instead, he needs wisdom. Yama was impressed with his dedication and devotion. Then Yama starts the philosophical discussion and demonstrates discernment between *preya* (the pleasant) and *shreya* (the beneficial). Hethenis is convinced of Nachiketa's worthiness and initiates him into the supreme knowledge of the Self (*Atman*).

### Pedagogical Values and Approaches

**Worthiness:** An essential quality for students. It means that if you want something, you must first deserve it. In this context, Nachiketa asked Yama about what happens after death. He initially ignored this, but his interest, patience, self-conviction, and maturity impressed Yama. These qualities demonstrate that he was a true seeker of knowledge. Finally, Yama imparts that knowledge to Nachiketa. However, we see this type of student missing in modern education. Most students are satisfied with short-term gains. The story is a wake-up call for the intellectual myopia of modern students.

**Duty for our Parents:** Nachiketa seeks the first boon for his father. He wants his father to be at peace for the rest of his life. This desire suggests that our primary responsibility is to care for our parents. This means we have responsibility for our parents. Every child should be accountable for taking care of and nurturing their parents, because the Sanatana culture gives *Pita* (father) the same value as God.

पिताधर्मःपितास्वर्गःपिताहिपरमंतपः।  
पितरिप्रीतिमापन्नेप्रीयन्तेसर्वदेवताः॥

*Pita Dharm Pita Swarg Pita Hi Param Tapah |*  
*PitariPritimapannePriyanteSarvadevata ||*  
(Padma Purana 1.50.9)

**Sacrifice:** Nachiketa's second wish is to acquire knowledge of the 'fire sacrifice that leads to heaven'. From this sentence, we say that sacrifice is a value. Traditionally, sacrifice refers to the offering of something valuable to a deity as a form of devotion or propitiation. In the present, sacrifice is the ignoring of pleasure, enjoyment, etc. In another sense, sacrifice is repressing your feelings and emotions: the more you sacrifice, the more respect you gain in society. In daily life, people make sacrifices for family, career, or personal growth. Parents often sacrifice time, money, and personal ambitions for their children's future. Employees are working long hours or relocating for better opportunities or to support loved ones. Students are sacrificing leisure for studies to build a better career. So, sacrifice indicates struggle. It is a key to success. A student does not succeed without hard work. Struggle is crucial for a student. Similarly, Nachiketa struggled without food and water for the proper knowledge. However, modern students often lack the aptitude for hard work. They fear hard work and always want pleasure and enjoyment.

**Patience and Discernment:** Yama first refuses to answer Nachiketa's question three times. He is testing his determination and curiosity. This pause highlights that genuine knowledge must be earned through persistence, a lesson that challenges today's culture of instant gratification among learners.

**Focus on Higher Knowledge:** Yama presents various offers to Nachiketa. He rejects these offers. He wants actual knowledge about the Soul and what happens after death. Then Yama shifts the discussion toward the eternal truths of Atman (Soul), Moksha (liberation), and Dharma (righteous living). This focus aligns with holistic education models that emphasise emotional, ethical, and spiritual growth alongside cognitive skills (Dalal, 2014).

**Question–Answer Method:** Instead of a didactic approach, Yama engages Nachiketa in a dialogue. He is leading him to self-inquiry. Nachiketa asks the questions, and Yama answers them. This aligns with the Question-Answering Method in modern education, where learners build their understanding through questioning and reflection.

**Lecture Method:** In Katha Upanishad, Yama instructs to Nachiketa:

श्रेयश्चप्रेयश्चमनुष्यमेतस्तौसम्परीत्यविविक्तधीरः।  
श्रेयोहिधीरोऽभिप्रेयसोवृणीतेप्रेयोमन्दोयोगक्शमाद्वृणीते॥  
Sreyashchapyashchamanushyametaustausamparityaviviktidhirah |  
Sreyo hi dhiro 'bhipreyasovṛṇitepreyomandoyogakshemadvṛṇite||  
(Katha Upanishad 1.2.2)

Yama provides *Nachiketa with Brahma Jnana* (divine knowledge) teachings. Before this teaching, he pronounced this shloka and explained it. He wanted to explain to him what is good and what is bad, what should be done and what should not be done. Through this, he explained the difference between good and evil and also stated that most people choose Preya (pleasant) for happiness and peace. However, we should choose Shreya (good). He uses this type of teaching as both a philosophical stance and a pedagogical strategy. Although he employs dialogue-based instruction, it is a core that mirrors the lecture method. This method is widely used nowadays.

**Ethical Leadership and Value-Based Learning:** The Katha Upanishad emphasises the roles of inner realisation and steadfast inquiry as essential to both ethical leadership and value-based education. Yama is a divine preceptor of cosmic law (Dharma) and a true leader. He teaches that the purpose of life extends beyond mere success to include righteous living and inner peace. He encourages not merely accepting external truths, but pursuing a more profound understanding through introspection and discernment. Nachiketa exemplifies this spirit by refusing superficial answers and persistently seeking the knowledge of the Self. This approach is echoed in the shloka —

"नायमात्माप्रवचनेनलभ्योनमेधयानबहुनाश्रुतेन।  
यमेवैषवणुतेतेनलभ्यःतस्यैषआत्माविवृणुतेतनूस्वाम्॥"  
Nayam atmapravacanenalabhyonamedhayanabahunasrutena |  
Yamevaiṣavṛṇutetenalabhyaḥtasyaiṣaatmavivṛṇutetanumsvam ||  
(Katha Upanishad 1.2.23)

This verse is profoundly relevant to value-based learning and personal growth. This shloka reminds us that true wisdom is not merely intellectual or informational, but experiential and transformative. It stresses the importance of sincerity, self-discipline, humility, and inner readiness in the learner. Nevertheless, the current education system measures knowledge through academic performance, information overload, or verbal proficiency. However, the National Education Policy 2020 is continuously supported by this.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Guru-Shishya Parampara is depicted in the dialogue between Yama and Nachiketa in the Katha Upanishad. It embodies enduring educational principles, including patience, self-inquiry, ethical conduct, and the quest for higher knowledge. Nachiketa's resolve and Yama's mentorship highlight a highly personal, transformative learning approach that emphasises character development, wisdom, and spiritual growth. In contrast, today's education system tends to focus more on academic achievement and preparing students for careers. This system often neglects moral and emotional development. Although digital resources and structured curricula are helpful alongside the traditional approach, they highlight the significance of value-driven learning and strong teacher-student bonds. Revisiting these stories and applying their principles, particularly the emphasis on Shreya (the good) over Preya (the pleasant). It can help modern education evolve toward a more holistic, human-centric approach, aligning with policies such as the NEP 2020.

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