

Chapter II. Isavasya Upanishad

The spread of the Vedic wisdom

The Lord, intent on the regeneration of the world, communicated *Vedas* through *Hiranyagarbha*, who in turn passed them on to His ten mental sons (*manasa-putras*), including Athri and Marichi. From them, the *Vedas* spread among humanity, handed down from one generation to another. As time passed and ages accumulated and continents moved, some *Vedas* got lost or were neglected as too difficult for comprehension, and only four have survived into modern times. These four were taught in the *Dwapara* era (*yuga*) to his disciples by Veda Vyasa, the greatest of the exponents of the *Vedas*.

When Vyasa was thus expounding the *Vedas*, engaged in spreading the sacred scripture, one disciple of his, Yajnavalkya by name, incurred his wrath. As punishment, Yajnavalkya had to regurgitate the *Yajur-veda*, which he had already learned, into the custody of his *guru*, leave the place, and take refuge in the divine Sun (*Surya-deva*), the treasure-house of the *Vedas*. Just then, the sages, who revere the *Vedas*, flew into the place in the shape of partridges (*thithiri*) and ate up the regurgitated *Yajur-veda*. That particular section of the *Veda* is called *Taithirya*.

Meanwhile, the Sun was pleased with the devotion and steadfastness of the unfortunate Yajnavalkya. He assumed the form of a horse (*vaji*) and blessed the sage with renewed knowledge of the *Yajur-veda*. The version thus taught by the horse came to be called *Vajasaneyi*. The *Yajur-veda* as promoted by Veda Vyasa is called *Krishna Yajur Veda*; that handed down by Yajnavalkya, *Sukla Yajur Veda*. (*Krishna* means black; *sukla*, white).

The first few sections, the *Karma-kandas* of these *Vedas* are *mantras* connected with ritual actions, and the last few sections, the *Jnana-kandas*, deal with spiritual wisdom.

Renunciation is the pathway to liberation

The *Isavasya Upanishad* is concerned with the sections on spiritual wisdom (*Jnana-kanda*). Since the opening *mantra* of this *Upanishad* starts with the word *Isavasya* (pervaded by the Supreme), the *Upanishad* is called by that name.

All things of this world – the transitory, the evanescent – are enveloped by the Lord, who is the true Reality of each. Therefore, they have to be used with reverent renunciation and without covetousness or greed, for they belong to the Lord and not to any one person.

Ishaavaasyam idham sarvam yathkinchatjagath-yaam jagath. Thena thyakthena bhunjeethaa, maa gridhah kasya svith dhanam.

This verse says that the universe is the immanence of the Lord, His form, His body. It is wrong to take the universe and Its Lord as different. It is a delusion, just a product of your own imagination. Just as your image under the water is not different from you, the universe (which is His image produced on your ignorance) is the same as He.

As long as one has this delusion, one cannot visualise the Reality immanent within; in fact, one will slide

into wrong thoughts, words, and deeds. A piece of sandalwood produces a bad smell when kept in water, but when taken out and rubbed into paste, the former perfume will return. When the authority of the *Vedas* and scriptures is respected, and when discrimination is sharpened on the practice of *dharmic* actions, the evil smell of wrong and wickedness will vanish and the pure innate perfume of the *Atma* will emerge. Then, the duality of doer and enjoyer will disappear, and the stage will be reached that is called withdrawal from all activity (*sarva-karma-sanyas*). In this *Upanishad*, this type of renunciation (*sanyasa*) is described as the pathway to liberation.

Work without the desire for its fruits

Renunciation that involves the destruction of the three urges for a mate, for progeny, and for wealth is very difficult to attain without purity of the mind (*chittha*).

In this *Upanishad*, the means for obtaining this renunciation is declared in the second *mantra*: carry out the daily offering of milk to the god of fire, etc. prescribed in the scriptures, believe that for liberation one has to be actively engaged in such work, and become convinced that no sin can cling as long as one is so engaged. Work without the desire for its fruit slowly cleanses impurities, like the crucible of the gold-smith. The pure mind is spiritual wisdom (*jnana*); it is the consummation of detachment.

If you are able to divest yourselves of desire when you are doing work, no impurity can touch you. You know that “chilliginji” seeds, when dropped into muddy water, have the power to separate the dirt and deposit it at the bottom; the seeds also sink to the bottom and slip out of sight! In the same way, those who are adepts in doing action (*karma*) without attachment have their minds perfectly cleansed, and the results of their acts lose their effectiveness and sink to the bottom.

Out of the 18 *mantras* in this *Upanishad*, only the first two deal directly with the problem of liberation and its solution. The other sixteen elaborate on this solution and serve as commentaries thereon.

See the Supreme Self in all beings and all beings in the Self

The *Atma* never undergoes modification; yet, it is faster than the mind! That is the mystery and the miracle. It appears to experience all states, but it has no growth, decline, or change. Though it is everywhere, it is not perceivable by the senses. It is because of its underlying existence and ever-present immanence that all growth, all activities, all changes take place. Cause and effect act and react on account of the basic stratum of the *Atmic* reality. Why, the very word “Lord (*Isa*)” carries this meaning. The *Atma* is near and far, inside and outside, still and moving. He who knows this truth is worthy of the name “spiritually wise person (*jnani*)”.

The ignorant can never grasp the fact of *Atmic* immanence. Those who are conscious can see things and feel their presence. Those who have lost awareness will search for the lost jewels, even though they actually wear them at the moment. Though one may know all things, one conceives the *Atma* as existing in some unapproachable, unreachable place on account of loss of consciousness. But the wise person, who is aware, sees the *Atma* in all beings and sees all beings as *Atma*. The wise person sees all beings as the same and perceives no distinction or difference. So the wise person saves themselves from duality.

The *Isavasya Upanishad* makes this great truth clear to all. Wise people, who have tasted that vision, will not be agitated by the blows of fortune or the enticements of the senses. They see all beings as themselves, having

their own innate identity; they are free from bondage, from *dharma* and lack of *dharma* (*a-dharma*), and from the needs and urges of the body. They are “self-illuminating (*swayam-prakasa*)”. So, the individual body (*jiva-rupa*) is not their genuine form, no, not even the gross and the subtle bodies are their forms.

That is why the first *mantra* of the *Isavasya* expounds on intentness on acquiring spiritual wisdom (*jnananishtha*) characterised by the absence of craving of any sort. This is the primary goal of the *Vedas*. But those who have cravings will find it difficult to get stabilised in that state of mind (*nishtha*). For such, the second *mantra* prescribes a secondary means, ritual action (*karma-nishtha*).

The rest of the *mantras* elaborate and support these two states —based on spiritual wisdom and action. Ritual action has desire and delusion as the cardinal urges; intentness on the cultivation of spiritual wisdom has discrimination (*vairagya*), the conviction that the world is not *Atma*, that is to say, not true, so it is profitless to have any dealings with it. Such an attitude of discrimination is the gateway to acquiring spiritual wisdom.

From the third to the eighth *mantra*, the real nature of the *Atma* is depicted through the condemnation of ignorance (*a-vidya*), which prevents understanding *Atma*.

Renunciation leads to self-realization

Thus the *Isavasya* teaches the lesson of renunciation through the first *mantra* and the lesson of “liberating activity” (through action devoid of attachment and anger (*raga* and *dwesha*)) in the second *mantra*. In the fourth and fifth *mantras*, it speaks of the *Atmic* principle (*Atma-thathwa*) and later of the fruits of the knowledge of that *Atmic* principle.

In the ninth *mantra*, the path of progressive liberation (*karma-mukthi*) is laid down. This path is useful for those who are too weak to follow the path of total renunciation but who are adepts in acts that are conducive to moral development and inner purification. This path coordinates all action on the principle of contemplative worship. Those who are engaged in acts that are contrary to spiritual knowledge (*vidya*) are full of ignorance, it says; those who confine themselves to the study and practice of divine forms are even worse, for their desire is for powers and skills. Knowledge leads to the world of the gods (*deva loka*), while action leads to the world of the fathers (*pitru loka*), it is said. So the spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) that results in Self-realization (*Atma-sakshathkara*) is something quite distinct from these; no attempt to coordinate the two can succeed.

To escape the cycle of birth-death, contemplate on Cosmic Divinity

Of course, one should not engage in anything opposed to the scriptures, and in the ultimate analysis, all actions are classed as ignorance (*a-vidya*). At best, action (*karma*) can help only to cleanse the mind, and contemplative worship can help only to achieve single-mindedness. Worship has to rise to the level of contemplation of the cosmic Divinity, the *Hiranyagarbha*; it has to ripen and develop into liberation while alive (*jivan-mukthi*) before the end of this life.

Knowledge of gods (*devatha-jnana*) and ritual actions have to be complementary and coordinated; then, one can escape the round of birth and death and become divine.