

The Īśā Upanisad in a New Light

Class 3 of 3 (Sept. 27, 2022)

7. He in whom it is the Self-Being that has become all existences that are Becomings, for he has the perfect knowledge, how shall he be deluded, whence shall he have grief who sees everywhere oneness?

[*yasmin sarvāṇi bhūtāni ātmaivābhūd vijānataḥ | tatra ko mohaḥ kaḥ śoka ekatvam anupaśyataḥ*]

- ◆ According to Śaṅkara, the Advaitic *jñānī* realizes that all beings are nothing but the Atman in the sense that the only reality is the nondual Atman and all names and forms are ultimately non-existent
- ◆ Śaṅkara interprets “*ekatvam*” as the “oneness of the Atman” (*ātmā-ekatvam*)
- ◆ Sri Ramakrishna on the *vijñānī*’s realization of oneness: “The *bhakta* also has a realization of oneness; he sees that there is nothing but God. Instead of saying that the world is unreal like a dream, he says that God has become everything. In a wax garden, everything is wax, but in various forms.” (*bhaktero ekākār jñān hoy; se dekhe īśvar chādā ār kichui nai. ‘svapnavat’ bale na, tabe bale tinī sab hoyechen; momer bāgāne sabī mom, tabe nānā rūp.*) (*Kathāmṛta* 740; *Gospel* 700).
- ◆ Following Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda interprets “*ekatvam*” as a oneness that encompasses everything in the universe: “When all life and the whole universe are seen in this Atman, then alone man has attained the secret. There is no more delusion for him. Where is any more misery for him who sees **this Oneness in the universe?** **This is another great theme of the Vedānta, this Oneness of life, this Oneness of everything.**...If you go below the surface, you find that Unity between man and man, between races and races, high and low, rich and poor, gods and men, and men and animals. If you go deep enough, **all will be seen as only variations of the One, and he who has attained to this conception of Oneness has no more delusion.** What can delude him?” (“God in Everything,” CW2:153)
- ◆ Sri Aurobindo glosses *vijānataḥ* as “having the perfect knowledge [i.e., *vijñāna*]” (37) of God by realizing that God has become everything and everyone in the world
- ◆ According to Sri Aurobindo, the Īśā Upaniṣad teaches a “comprehensive” Advaita rather than an “illusionist” Advaita: “The Isha Upanishad does not teach a pure and exclusive Monism; it declares the One without denying the Many and its method is to see the One in the Many....The ensemble of these ideas is consistent only with a synthetic or comprehensive as opposed to an illusionist or exclusive Monism.” (p. 23, note 1)

9. Into a blind darkness they enter who follow after the Ignorance, they as if into a greater darkness who devote themselves to the Knowledge alone.

[*andhaṃ tamaḥ praviśanti ye ’vidyām upāsate | tato bhūya iva te tamo ya u vidyāyām ratāḥ*]

10. Other, verily, it is said, is that which comes by the Knowledge, other that which comes by the Ignorance; this is the lore we have received from the wise who revealed That to our understanding.

[*anyad evāhur vidyayā anyad āhur avidyayā | iti śuśrūma dhīrāṇām ye nastad vicacakṣire*]

11. He who knows That as both in one, the Knowledge and the Ignorance, by the Ignorance crosses beyond death and by the Knowledge enjoys Immortality.

[*vidyān cāvidyān ca yastad vedobhayaṃ saha | avidyayā mṛtyuṃ tīrtvā vidyayāmṛtam aśnute*]

- ◆ According to Śaṅkara, mantras 9–11 are addressed to inferior spiritual aspirants who are not qualified to practice Jñāna Yoga
- ◆ *Avidyā*=Vedic rites (*karma*), *Vidyā*=meditation on minor deities (*devatā-jñāna*)
- ◆ Mantras 9–11 denounce the separate practice of either rites or meditation and recommends that inferior aspirants combine both in order to attain *relative* “immortality” (*amṛtam* of mantra 11) in the form of “becoming one with the *devatās*” (*devatā-ātmabhāvam*)
- ◆ Sri Ramakrishna on using the “thorns” of *ajñāna* and *jñāna* to attain *vijñāna*:
SRI RAMAKRISHNA: “Rama said, ‘Brother, go beyond both knowledge [*jñāna*] and ignorance [*ajñāna*].’ He who has knowledge has ignorance also. If a thorn has entered your foot, get another thorn and with its help take out the first; then throw away the second also.”
M: “Should one throw away both knowledge and ignorance?”
SRI RAMAKRISHNA: “Yes. That is why one should acquire *vijñāna*. You see, he who is aware of light is also aware of darkness....What is *vijñāna*? It is knowing God in a special way....The realization that God alone has become the universe and all living beings is *vijñāna*.” (9 Sept. 1883)
- ◆ According to Sri Aurobindo, *Vidyā* means “the consciousness of Unity” and *Avidyā* means “the consciousness of Multiplicity” (51): “The perfection of man, therefore, is the full manifestation of the Divine in the individual through the supreme accord between Vidya and Avidya. Multiplicity must become conscious of its oneness, Oneness embrace its multiplicity.” (52)
- ◆ Sri Aurobindo: “Those who are devoted entirely to the principle of indiscriminate Unity and seek to put away from them the integrality of the Brahman, also put away from them knowledge and completeness and enter as if into a greater darkness. They enter into some special state and accept it for the whole, mistaking exclusion in consciousness for transcendence in consciousness.” (53)
- ◆ Summary of Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of mantras 9–11:
 - *Avidyā* (*Jagat satyaṃ brahma mithyā*) leads to darkness
 - *Vidyā* (*Brahma satyaṃ jagat mithyā*) leads as if to an even greater darkness
 - *Vijñāna* (*Brahma satyaṃ jagat satyam*)—the combination of *Avidyā* and *Vidyā*—leads to immortality (*amṛtam*), the highest spiritual fulfillment

18. O god Agni, knowing all things that are manifested, lead us by the good path to the felicity; remove from us the devious attraction of sin. To thee completest speech of submission we would dispose.

[*agne naya supathā rāye asmān viśvāni deva vayunāni vidvān
yuyodhy asmaj juhurāṇam eno bhūyiṣṭhām te namauktim vidhema*]

- ◆ According to Śaṅkara, the Īśā Upaniṣad ends on an anti-climax: mantra 18 voices the inferior spiritual aspirant’s dying wish to attain temporary oneness with Hiraṇyagarbha
- ◆ In fact, Śaṅkara claims that only mantra 1 and mantras 3 through 8 of the Īśā Upaniṣad address superior aspirants who are fit to practice Advaitic *jñānayoga*, while all the other mantras—namely, 2 and 9 through 18—address inferior aspirants who are only qualified for *karmayoga* and *upāsanā*, the worship and contemplation of *devatās*
- ◆ According to Sri Aurobindo, *Agni*, in the Vedic sense, is *Cit-Śakti*, “the flame of the Divine Will” (77)
- ◆ The final mantra, then, is a prayer to Śakti for the highest spiritual illumination, and the means to achieving this highest illumination is surrender to the Divine Will