

## The Īśā Upaniṣad in a New Light

Class 1 (Sept. 13, 2022)

► Sri Aurobindo:

“[T]he word Vedanta is usually identified with the strict Monism and the peculiar theory of Maya established by the lofty and ascetic intellect of Shankara. But it is the Upanishads themselves and not Shankara’s writings, the text and not the commentary, that are the authoritative Scripture of the Vedantin. Shankara’s, great and temporarily satisfying as it was, is still only one synthesis and interpretation of the Upanishads. There have been others in the past which have powerfully influenced the national mind and there is no reason why there should not be a yet more perfect synthesis in the future. It is such a synthesis, embracing all life and action in its scope, that the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have been preparing.”

[*The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo, Volume 13: Essays in Philosophy and Yoga: Shorter Works 1910-1950* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1998), 10-11.]

► Swami Vivekananda:

“We must interpret the Vedas in the light of the experience of Sri Ramakrishna. Shankaracharya and all other commentators made the tremendous mistake to think that the whole of the Vedas say only one thing. Therefore they were guilty of torturing those of the apparently conflicting Vedic texts which go against their own doctrines, into the meaning of their particular schools...[N]o one can truly understand the Vedas and Vedanta, unless one studies them in the light of the utterance of Sri Ramakrishna.”

(“God in Everything” [1896]; CW7: 411-12)

► Sri Ramakrishna on the spiritual state of *viññāna*:

“The *jñānī* gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating, ‘Not this, not this.’ Only then can he realize Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the *viññānī*, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brick-dust. That which is realized as Brahman through the eliminating process of ‘Not this, not this’ is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The *viññānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*...A man cannot live on the roof for a long time. He comes down again. Those who realize Brahman in *samādhi* come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings. . . . This is known as *viññāna*.” (*Kathāmṛta* 50–51 / *Gospel* 103–4)

► Sri Aurobindo’s 1913 letter to a disciple: “Remember also that we derive from Ramakrishna. For myself it was Ramakrishna who personally came and first turned me to this Yoga.” (CWSA 36: 179)

► “Vivekananda in the Alipore jail gave me the foundations of that knowledge which is the basis of our Sadhana [spiritual practice].” (CWSA 36: 179)

► Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual experience in jail: “I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva [another name for Kṛṣṇa] who surrounded me...I looked at the prisoners in the jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them I saw Vasudeva, it was Narayana whom I found in these darkened souls and misused bodies.” (CWSA 8: 6)

- ▶ According to Sri Aurobindo, the unifying principle of the entire Īśā Upaniṣad is “the uncompromising reconciliation of uncompromising extremes” (CWSA 13: 83).
- ▶ The Īśā Upaniṣad resolves sequentially the following nine pairs of opposites:
  1. God and the world (verse 1, line 1)
  2. Renunciation and enjoyment (verse 1, line 2)
  3. External action and internal freedom (verse 2)
  4. The One stable Brahman and the multiple Movement (verses 4–5)
  5. Being and Becoming (verses 6–7)
  6. The dynamic personal God and the transcendent impersonal Brahman (verse 8)
  7. Knowledge (*Vidyā*) and Ignorance (*Avidyā*) (verses 9–11)
  8. Birth (*Sambhūti*) and Non-Birth (*Asambhūti*) (verses 12–14)
  9. Works and Knowledge (verses 15–18)

**Figure 1. Sri Aurobindo on the Symmetrical Structure of the Īśā Upaniṣad**

