

The Īśā Upaniṣad in a New Light

Class 2 (Sept. 20, 2022)

1. All this is for habitation by the Lord, whatsoever is individual universe of movement in the universal motion. By that renounced thou shouldst enjoy; lust not after any man's possession. (Sri Aurobindo's translation)

[*īśā vāsyam idaṃ sarvaṃ yat kiñca jagatyāṃ jagat
tena tyaktena bhujjīthā mā gṛdhaḥ kasya sviddhanam*]

- ▶ According to Śaṅkara, the meaning of the first line of the first verse is that “all this that is unreal [*anṛtam idaṃ sarvaṃ*], whether moving or not moving, is to be covered [*ācchādaniyam*] by one's own Supreme Ātman.”
- ▶ Glossing “*idaṃ sarvaṃ*” as “*anṛtam idaṃ sarvaṃ*,” Śaṅkara claims that the first line supports the Advaitic doctrine of the unreality of the world: one should ignore this unreal world and contemplate instead “the supreme truth of the Ātman.”
- ▶ From the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (16 December 1883):
M.: “Is the world unreal?” [*jagat ki mithyā?*]
MASTER (to M.): “Why should the universe be unreal? That is the view of Advaitic *jñānīs*. After realizing God, one sees that it is God Herself who has become the universe and all living beings.”
- ▶ Both Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo interpret the first mantra of the Īśā Upaniṣad from the standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta
- ▶ Vivekananda: “Here I can only lay before you what the Vedānta seeks to teach, and that is the deification of the world. The Vedānta does not in reality denounce the world....[I]t really means deification of the world—giving up the world as we think of it, as we know it, as it appears to us—and to know what it really is. Deify it; it is God alone. **We read at the commencement of one of the oldest of the Upanishads, ‘Whatever exists in this universe is to be covered with the Lord.’** We have to cover everything with the Lord Himself, not by a false sort of optimism, not by blinding our eyes to the evil, but by really seeing God in everything.” (“God in Everything”; CW2: 146)
- ▶ Sri Aurobindo: “There are three possible senses of *vāsyam*, ‘to be clothed,’ ‘to be worn as a garment’ and ‘to be inhabited.’ The first is the ordinarily accepted meaning. Shankara explains it in this significance, that we must lose the sense of this unreal objective universe in the sole perception of the pure Brahman. So explained the first line becomes a contradiction of the whole thought of the Upanishad which teaches the reconciliation, by the perception of essential Unity, of the apparently incompatible opposites, God and the World, Renunciation and Enjoyment, Action and internal Freedom, the One and the Many, Being and its Becomings, the passive divine Impersonality and the active divine Personality, the Knowledge and the Ignorance, the Becoming and the Not-Becoming, Life on earth and beyond and the supreme Immortality. The image is of the world either as a garment or as a dwelling-place for the informing and governing Spirit. The latter significance agrees better with the thought of the Upanishad.” (p. 5, n. 1)
- ▶ According to Sri Aurobindo, the first line of the first verse resolves the apparent antithesis between the eternal, immutable, perfect God and the transient, changing, imperfect world by affirming that the world is God's “dwelling-place”

Mantra 1, line 2: *tena tyaktena bhuñjīthāḥ*

- ▶ According to Pāṇini's grammar, "*bhuñjīthāḥ*" must mean "enjoy" or "eat," not "protect."
- ▶ While Śaṅkara generally follows Pāṇinī, he notably departs from Pāṇinī here in glossing "*bhuñjīthāḥ*" as "*pālayethāḥ*" (protect), since this meaning accords better with his Advaitic reading.
- ▶ Taking the Ātman to be the implied direct object of "*bhuñjīthāḥ*," Śaṅkara claims that "*tena tyaktena bhuñjīthāḥ*" means that one should "protect" the Ātman in the sense of practicing "steadfast devotion to knowledge of the Ātman."
- ▶ Accordingly, the first verse indicates that "one who thinks of the Lord as the Ātman is qualified only for renunciation of the threefold desire for son, wealth, and worlds and not for action" (Gambhīrānanda [1957] 1989: 5).
- ▶ Therefore, for Śaṅkara, the first verse enjoins renunciation of works for *jñānayogins* who are qualified to practice steadfast devotion to knowledge of the Ātman.

- ▶ Sri Ramakrishna: "The aspirant, while practising spiritual discipline, looks upon the world as a 'framework of illusion' [*dhokār tāṭi*]. Again, after the attainment of Knowledge, the vision of God, this very world becomes to him a 'mansion of mirth' [*majār kuṭi*]." (*Gospel*, Oct. 16 1883)
- ▶ Vivekananda: "**When we have given up desires**, then alone shall we be able to read and **enjoy** this universe of God." ("God in Everything"; CW2: 149)
- ▶ Sri Aurobindo: "Real integral enjoyment of all this movement and multiplicity in its truth and in its infinity depends upon an absolute renunciation; but the renunciation intended is an absolute renunciation of the principle of desire founded on the principle of egoism and not a renunciation of world-existence." (p. 85)

2. Doing verily works in this world one should wish to live a hundred years. Thus it is in thee and not otherwise than this; action cleaves not to a man. (Sri Aurobindo's translation)

[*kurvann eveha karmāṇi jijīviṣec chataṃ samāḥ
evaṃ tvayi nānyatheto 'sti na karma lipyate nare*]

- ▶ Vivekananda: "Desire to live a hundred years...Have the desire to live a long life of helpfulness, of blissfulness and activity on this earth. Thus working, you will find the way out. There is no other way....So work, says the Vedanta, putting God in everything, and knowing Him to be in everything."
- ▶ Sri Aurobindo: "Life and works can and should be accepted in their fullness; for the manifestation of the Lord in life and works is the law of our being and the object of our world-existence." (p. 86)

- ▶ This second mantra poses a serious problem for Śaṅkara, since it enjoins action in the world, not renunciation of action
- ▶ Śaṅkara's interpretive strategy is to appeal to the Advaitic doctrine of *adhikāribheda*, the doctrine of differing competencies
- ▶ According to Śaṅkara, while the first mantra enjoins renunciation for spiritually evolved aspirants who are qualified for *jñānayoga*, the second mantra enjoins action for less evolved aspirants who are only qualified for *karmayoga*
- ▶ Sri Aurobindo objects that Śaṅkara's reading of mantra 2 as a "concession to the ignorant" is "forced and unnatural"
- ▶ Modern scholars like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1913: 569) and Swami Harshananda (2013: 38-55) agree with Sri Aurobindo on this point