
UNIT 4b ISHA UPANISHAD

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4b.0 OBJECTIVES

How to understand life on earth? What must be the goal and aspirations of life? Mundane existence is the necessary condition for the realisation of the freedom and immortality of the self. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, the objectives of the Upanishad can be summarised as understanding:

- The Conscious Lord and the Phenomenal Nature
- Renunciation and Enjoyment
- Action in Nature and Freedom in the Soul
- The One Stable Brahman and the Multiple Manifestations
- Being and Becoming
- The Active Lord and the Indifferent *Akshara* Brahman
- *Vidya* and *Avidya*
- Work and Knowledge

4b.1 INTRODUCTION

Isavasya Upanishad is known also as *Isa Upanishad*. We will be using the shorter form in our writings. *Isha Upanishad* belongs to the earlier or Vedic group of Indian Scriptures. Rshi Yajnavalkya received the instructions from God Surya who appeared in the form of a horse (*vaji*). These instructions together are known as *Sukla-yajurveda-samhita*. This branch is known as the *vajasaneyi* branch as instructed by the “*vaji*”. It has its *karma-kanda* and *jnana-kanda*. Its first 39 chapters deal with various sacrifices and the 40th chapter, consisting of only 18 verses, forms its *jnana-kanda*. This last chapter is known as the *Isavasya Upanishad*.

4b.2 CENTRAL THEMES OF THE UPANISHAD

The main problem discussed in it is the question of reconciling human life and activity with the monistic standpoint of the Vedantic times. It neither supports extreme illusionism nor anti-pragmatism, although *Isha Upanishad* tries to reconcile the uncompromising extremes.

This world is the manifestations of the Brahman. He is becoming “to create forms of His consciousness in motion in which He as the one soul in many bodies can take up his habitation and enjoy the multiplicity and the movement with all their relations.” For the simple minds, this is explained as *lila* of the Lord. In the experience of the consciousness, man becomes first conscious of something external to him and only then he can become conscious of his own consciousness. It is from the physical nature we move into the spiritual nature of human being. Body is not the real man, it is nothing but the Spirit. “In Rahner’s view, human beings are *spirit* in the world. *Spirit* here “names” the dimension of the human person which is distinct from but not opposed to the material, i.e., the body. The person is properly understood as a unity, a whole, rather than as a hybrid of competing parts of body and soul, flesh and spirit, mind and matter. The spiritual dimension of the person describes the ability that human beings possess which enables them to transcend or break out beyond themselves and the limits of self-isolation, self-preoccupation, and self-absorption. This they do through the pursuit of knowledge, freedom, and love.” (*Understanding Christian Spirituality*, p.33) Self-transcendence is the means to the realisation of human’s truth.

Renunciation and Enjoyment

The multiplicity in the process of becoming can be fully enjoyed only through absolute renunciation of egoistic desires. Egoistic desires are only the “vital deformation of the divine Ananda.” Ananda is “the conscious principle of existence.” The goal of existence itself is the infinite delight, which could be realized only in liberation. Joy is the foundation of human life.

Along the line of growth and achieving maturity, we say ‘one has come of age.’ It simply means the person has grown to know and acknowledge his and other’s role and responsibility in the day to day life. Maturity implies parenting. Parenting can be physical and social. Parenting means nurturing and developing. We have emphasized too much the physical parenting. Social parenting is also important. It consists in developing a civic sense or an attitude of concern for social wellbeing. Every life must become a life that contributes to the welfare of others-humans, sub-humans and nature. *Loka samasto sukhino bhavantu* (Let there be peace and joy in the whole world) is the upanishadic proclamation for the world.

An underdeveloped person cannot contribute duly, promptly and precisely for the welfare of all. Therefore, knowing one’s own talents and real requirements is necessary for giving and receiving mutually to help fulfilling each other. Consumption is a need in our earthly existence. Physical and psychological needs are to be met. Hence social stratification and institutions are needed. Depending on quality (culture, education and commitment), responsibilities and privileges are determined. Respect first one’s own commitment through service for others and then other’s commitment by rewarding or accomplishing their needs. Be satisfied with what you are and have, and have no malice or greed concerning the richness of others.

Action in Nature and Freedom of the Soul

Soul and body are real and they are the two parts of human reality. Actions are not against the nature of the Soul. Ignorance gets the Soul seemingly bound by

the works of the body. By realising the consciousness of unity in the Lord, one experiences the unity with all beings. Life and works thus becomes “the law of our being and the object of our” phenomenal existence. The liberated person reveals himself as ‘passive in state, but active in work.’ This is the state where the dualities of life – birth-death, joy-sorrow, good-bad, love-hatred, pleasure-suffering – do not affect the “I”, but continuously act as self-fulfillment. The Soul is free and acts freely without effecting any karmic residue.

The One stable Brahman and the multiple Manifestations

Movement and multiplicity of the one Brahman “is only a phenomenon of our consciousness.” For practical purposes, we make distinctions and differences (subject-object, far-near, internal-external etc.) in Brahman, the one real existence. It is required in the spatio-temporal realm for the development of consciousness. Consciousness first becomes aware of something other than itself and only then it comes to the awareness of itself.

Multiplicity is to be properly understood. All separative forces are self-destructive too. Multiplicity promotes separatedness. Individual existences compete to sustain and succeed. Accumulation, consumption and manipulation of resources occur in the competition. Class and caste distinctions are promoted for individual gains. In the case of an intellectual flowering of the oppressed, the enlightened will sow the seeds for a revolution. The orthodox ritualistic rigidity of the ruling class will not render sufficient strength to upkeep them straight and steady. History has proved it politically, sociologically and culturally. Yet we find the world of multiplicity continues and it is relevant too. We must find a way to maintain both multiplicity and unity, mutually supporting and sustaining, leading to individual liberation and social harmony.

Being and Becoming

Being and Becoming are objects of our consciousness. “Being is one, Becomings are many; but this simply means that all Becomings are one Being who places Himself variously in the phenomenal movement of His consciousness.” We are busy with counting and consuming the multiplicities. From the stand point of practical truth (*vyaharika satya*), being and acting requires multiplicity. But in the absence of the awareness of the (*paramartika satya*) or the ultimate truth, man’s true nature does not come to light. The fulfillment is understood to be pleasing or achieving one’s goal for oneself or for others or for both. One can be and act in three ways. (1) Be and act as my (blind) mind says or conscience reveals as the best. Ordinarily pleasures of consumption and achievement are the meaning-giving aspects here. This is the life of likes. (2) Be and act as to what other’s say. Imitating the structured majority is the model here. Find one’s fullness in adjusting and accommodating with the institutionalized traditions. This is the life of the commandments and customs. (3) Be and act according to the illumined consciousness. The ultimate truth of unity shines forth. The individual finds the Self. Multiplicity becomes conscious of its oneness and oneness embraces its multiplicity. What is required is seeing the indwelling One in all. This realisation will remove the delusion of separate existence and the limiting factors of egoism and desires. Find the deeper self in this sham show of incessant becomings of the phenomenal world. Human beings have never ending desires and many resort to coveting. According to Sri Ramakrishna “the worldly life rotates on the two wheels of sex and gold.” To realise the Supreme Soul, one

must overcome the worldly realm. Self-discipline and renouncing desires are the means recommended. This is the life of sincere love.

The Active Lord and the Indifferent Akshara Brahman

Brahman has the active and the inactive sides in Him. The inactive state implies that He is free from all modifications. He acts without becoming. “These are the positive and negative poles of one indivisible consciousness.” *Isa Vasya Upanishad* presents two types of life. They are the life of works and the life of contemplation. Life of contemplation demands renunciation of all worldly ties. This leads to the realisation of the indifferent Akshara Brahman. *Sthithapranja* or the perfectly balanced person lives in this world an active life for the good of all. He leads an active life without being bound by anything.

Vidya and Avidya

There is the knowledge of the One and the knowledge of the Many. “If the mind (*manisi*) absorbs itself in God as the formal becoming (*paribhu*) and separates itself from God in the true Idea (*kavi*), then it loses Vidya, the knowledge of the One, and has only the knowledge of the Many which becomes no longer knowledge at all but ignorance, Avidya” which causes the sense of separate ego-sense. Avidya is required to develop individual relations, which when illuminated will reveal the One in all. “This is our proper course and not either to devote ourselves exclusively to the life of Avidya or to reject it entirely for motionless absorption in the One.” “The ego created by Avidya is a necessary mechanism for affirming individuality in the universal as a starting-point for this supreme achievement.”

Works and Knowledge

Works and Knowledge can be understood as the expressions of the egoistic mental character. “Mental knowledge is not true knowledge; true knowledge is that which is based on the true insight, the sight of the Seer.” Mind covers the face of the Truth, Truth consciousness. When the covering is removed, “the all embracing truth-ideation, *mahas, veda, drsti*, replaces the fragmentary mental activity.” True Buddhi (*vijnana*) “leads to pure knowledge (*jnana*), pure consciousness (*cit*). There we realise our entire identity with the Lord in all at the very roots of our being.” The Upanishad makes a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. “Knowledge is of things, acts and relations. But wisdom is of Brahman alone; and beyond all things, acts, and relations, he abides forever. To become one with him is the only wisdom.”

At the level of consciousness of multiplicity, willing and seeing is different. The Truth may be falsified without being aware of its falsification. At the level of the illumined consciousness, Will and Seeing are one. “Therefore when we have the sight and live in the Truth-Consciousness, our will becomes the spontaneous law of the truth in us and, knowing all its acts and their sense and objective, leads straight to the human goal, which was always the enjoyment of the Ananda, the Lord’s delight in self-being, the state of Immortality.” The Individual is transformed to be egoless; matter no more binds him. He lives with “the glory of the divine life and the divine Being.”

4b.3 VISION OF LIFE IN ISHA UPANISHAD

Isha Upanishad is teaching to lead a full life, active and actualizing. Life is to be formed by performing and enjoying. This presupposes the knowledge of the nature and the purpose of life of the embodied Self. The experienced fact is that before knowing and forming, people begin to perform and enjoy. There is cupidity in the mind of man. “This twin source of human bondage, viz, wealth and sex - *Kaamini-kanchan* is what constitutes worldliness, and worldly bondage. Said Sri Ramakrishna: *Kaama-kanchanhi samsaar*-the wheel of worldly life rotates on the two wheels of sex and gold.” People who are seeking the highest perfection in life must get over this bondage of ignorance. Different schools of thought and teachers of Indian philosophical traditions agree that ignorance must be wiped out for liberation. S. Radhakrishnan agrees with Buddha concerning the path to be followed. “For the removal of ignorance a strict morality is essential. *Sila* and *prajna*, good conduct and intuitive insight are inseparably united. The Buddha does not speak of codes and conventions, laws and rites. The way to be happy is to have a good heart and mind which will show itself in good deeds.” Mere intellectual realisation of truth does not give life. Each individual is different but endowed with special gifts and talents by birth itself. They are to be found and awakened both for self-realisation and social realisation. This process may call for renunciation, a renunciation of the egoistic pleasures and malices. The first verse of *Isha Upanishad* brings this to our notice.

Analysing texts

“*savasyam idam sarvam, yat kimca jagatyam jagat*

Tena tyaktena bhunjitha, ma grdhah kasya svid dhana.”

Word Meaning:

Isavasyam – God’s residence; *idam sarvam* – this whole universe; *yat kimca* – and whatever (is); *jagat* – moving(emotional); *jagatyam* – in this moving world; *tena tyaktena* – what is granted by God(*tyaktena* means also to be renounced); *bhunjithas* – eat or enjoy; *ma grdha* – don’t covet; *kasyasvid* – anybody’s; *dhanam* – wealth.

This universe is the House of Lord; whatever is there in this moving world, is His residence; whatever is granted by Him, enjoy and covet nobody’s wealth.

Different Interpretations

There are difference of opinions regarding the translation and interpretation of the texts. To sight an example:

“By the Lord (Isa) enveloped must this all be – Hume.

All this is enveloped by God – S. Radhakrishnan.

All this is to be hidden in the Lord (the Self) – Max Muller.

All that must be enveloped by the Lord – Swami Sarvananda.

All things of the world must be covered by the Lord – Swami Mrdananda.

All things should be pervaded by the Lord – V. Balakrishnan”

The omnipresent Lord is present in every being in this universe. Things of this world are in motion or change. Assembling and disassembling are in the nature of material things. In other words, birth and death are only the two sides of all material realities. Yet there is something that is transcending assimilation and dissimulation. Our true self is neither born nor dies. It only acquires the body it deserves. This acquisition is for a particular purpose. The Self is to be known and liberated. This liberation consists of the awareness of unity, the oneness of all beings in Brahman, the indwelling Spirit.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What is the use of mundane life according to the Isa Upanishad?

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2) What is the understanding of multiplicity in the Upanishad?

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4b. 4 LET US SUM UP

“Life provides one with chances and fancies

If one is lured by fancies, life is doomed

If one is pruned by the chances, life is tuned

And there will be music and dance in one’s heart”.

Earthly existence is the chance given to us for realising our authentic and true nature. We are all individuals, but we are more than individuals too. At the deepest core, we are all one. Appearances are deceiving. Transcending the individuation, we must realise ourselves. It is possible through self-discipline and an active life of commitment. Life is meaningful when we delve deep into the appearances and become aware of the hidden Self. Life and works are very well enjoined in this Upanishad. “Works are the essence of Life. Life is a manifestation of the Brahman.” Life should be love expressed joyfully but unconditionally.

4b. 5 KEY WORDS

- Sila** : *Sila* (Sanskrit) or *sila* (Pali) is usually rendered into English as “virtue,” other translations include “good conduct,” “morality” “moral discipline,” and “precept.” It is an action that is an intentional effort. It refers to moral purity of thought, word, and deed. The four conditions of *sila* are chastity, calmness, quiet, and extinguishment, that is, no longer being susceptible to perturbation by passionate emotions and desires.
- Prajna** : *Prajna* has been translated as “wisdom,” “understanding,” “discernment,” “cognitive acuity,” or “know-how.” In some sects of Buddhism, it especially refers to the wisdom that is based on the direct realization of the Four Noble Truths, impermanence, interdependent origination, non-self, emptiness, etc. *Prajna* is the wisdom that is able to extinguish afflictions and bring about enlightenment.

4b.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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4b.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Mundane existence is the necessary condition for the realisation of the freedom and immortality of the self. “Life in the world and life in the spirit are not incompatible.” Acting in the world for the good of every one is only a flowering of the realisation of the Self. What we should be renouncing is not the world but the ego, the selfishness of life. Freedom from egocentrism reveals the Self within and the Brahman without, and their identity.
- 2) Movement and multiplicity of the one Brahman “is only a phenomenon of our consciousness.” For practical purposes, we make distinctions and differences (subject-object, far-near, internal-external etc.) in Brahman, the one real existence. It is required in the spatio-temporal realm for the development of consciousness. Consciousness first becomes aware of something other than itself and only then it comes to the awareness of itself. Multiplicity is to be properly understood. All separative forces are self-destructive too. Multiplicity promotes separatedness. Individual existences compete to sustain and succeed. Accumulation, consumption and manipulation of resources occur in the competition. Class and caste distinctions are promoted for individual gains.