

## Ishopanishad

Translation by Shukavak Dasa

@ SRI 2012

*Recognition of the Controller who pervades the foundations of life*

Text One

*īśā vāsyam idam sarvam yat kim ca jagatyām jagat/  
tena tyaktena bhūñjīthā mā gridham kasya svid dhanam//*

Whatever exists in this moving world is pervaded<sup>1</sup> by a Lord<sup>2</sup>. You may enjoy<sup>3</sup> this world, but only in a renounced way<sup>4</sup>. Do not covet the property of another.

Text Two

*kurvann eveha karmāṇī jīviṣec chatam samāḥ/  
evam tvayi nānyatheto 'sti na karma lipyate nare//*

Acting in this way, you may aspire to live a hundred years. For such action does not bind<sup>5</sup> a person.

Text Three

*asuryā nāma te lokā andhena tamasā 'vrtāḥ/  
tāms te pretyābhigacchanti ye ke cātmahano janāḥ//*

Indeed there are hellish worlds,<sup>6</sup> places of utter darkness. Those who deny the soul<sup>7</sup> proceed to them after departing this world.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "Is pervaded" is a translation of "vāsyam" which is literally "covered" or "enveloped."

<sup>2</sup> "By a Lord" (īśā) is literally "by a controlling force." This is interpreted by Śāṅkara as the all pervading *ātman*. Madhva takes it as *yajña*, the Lord of sacrifice, Viṣṇu.

<sup>3</sup> "You may enjoy" (*bhūñjīthāḥ*) is derived from the verbal root *bhuj* which means to enjoy, to eat, to consume, or to possess. Śāṅkara glosses *bhūñjīthāḥ* as "you must protect." He combines this with *tena tyaktena* (by this renunciation) and so *tena tyaktena bhūñjīthā* means "you must protect yourself through renunciation of this world."

<sup>4</sup> "In a renounced way" (*tena tyaktena*) is literally, "with that, abandoned".

<sup>5</sup> "For this kind of action does not bind" (*na karma lipyate*) is literally "Action does not stain."

<sup>6</sup> "Hellish worlds" (*asuryāḥ ... lokāḥ*) is literally "places fit for the demoniac." Śāṅkara interprets this as lower births such as trees etc. Madhva says it means places without happiness. A variant reading is *asūryāḥ ... lokāḥ*, sunless worlds.

<sup>7</sup> "Deny the soul" (*ātma-hana*) is literally "kill the *ātman*."

<sup>8</sup> Compare this verse to Bṛh 4.4.11.

*This paradoxical being*

Text Four

*anejad ekaṁ manaso javīyo nainad devā āpnuvan pure am arṣat/  
tad dhāvato 'nyān atyeti tiṣṭhat tasminn apo mātariśvā dadhāti//*

There is an immovable One,<sup>9</sup> quicker than the mind, whom even the gods<sup>10</sup> cannot touch. Though remaining still, It rushes ahead. Heat and breath<sup>11</sup> generate action<sup>12</sup> within its being.

Text Five

*tad ejati tan naijati tad dūre tad v antike/  
tad antarasya sarvasya tad u sarvasyāsya bāhyataḥ//*

It moves. It moves not.<sup>13</sup> It is far. It is near. It is within all things and yet it exists outside of all things.<sup>14</sup>

Text Six

*yas tu sarvāṇi bhūtāny ātmany evānupaśyati/  
sarva-bhūteṣu cātmānaṁ tato na vijugupsate//*

Indeed, the one who sees this Lord within all beings and all beings within this Lord<sup>15</sup> is not beset by fear.<sup>16</sup>

Text Seven

*yasmin sarvāṇi bhūtāny ātmaivābhūd vijānataḥ/  
tatra ko mohaḥ kaḥ śokaḥ ekatvam anupaśyataḥ//*

---

<sup>9</sup> “There is an immovable one”: Śankara interprets the one (*ekam*) as the *ātman*, the all encompassing single Soul. Madhva takes it as Vishnu.

<sup>10</sup> “The gods” (*devāḥ*) is here interpreted by Śankara to be the senses of the body.

<sup>11</sup> “Heat and breath” (*mātariśvan*) are literally the fire and wind gods.

<sup>12</sup> “Action” (*apaḥ*) may also refer to primordial waters.

<sup>13</sup> “It moves. It moves not.” (*tad ejati tan naijati*): Madhva interpret this as, “The Lord causes fear, the Lord does not fear.” The verbal root is *ej* which literally means to move, shake or tremble. Most commentators take this as movement. Madhva takes it as fear.

<sup>14</sup> Compare this verse to BG 13.15.

<sup>15</sup> Here the use of “Lord” is a translation of “*ātman*.”

<sup>16</sup> “Is not beset by fear” (*na vijugupsate*) is literally “does not hide away.” Śankara takes it as “does not despise anyone.” Madhva takes it as “has no fear.” Compare this verse to BG 6.30.

Where is the delusion or sorrow for the person who sees this oneness<sup>17</sup> and who understands how this Lord has become all beings?

*A positive description of this controller*

Text Eight

*sa paryagāc chukram akāyam avraṇam asnāviraṃ śuddham apāpavidham/  
kavir manīṣī paribhūḥ svayambhūḥ yāthātathyato 'rthān vyadadhāc chāśvatībhyaḥ samābhyaḥ//*

This Lord is all pervading, radiant, bodiless, unhurt, without sinews, pure, and untouched by evil. He is the seer, the wise one, and the self-existent governing principle. He has rightly apportioned the objects of the world through all of time.

Text Nine

*andham tamaḥ praviśanti yo 'vidyām upāsate/  
tato bhūya eva te tamo ya u vidyāyām ratāḥ//*

Those who are intent upon matter enter blinding darkness. But those who delight in spirit enter an even greater darkness.<sup>18</sup>

Text Ten

*anyad evāhur vidyayā 'nyad āhur avidyayā/  
iti śuśrūma dhīrāṇām ye naś tad vicacakṣire//*

One is the result of spirit and the other is the result of matter. This we have learned from the wise.<sup>19</sup>

Text Eleven

*vidyām cāvidyām ca yas tad vedobhayam saha/*

---

<sup>17</sup> “Oneness” is a translation of “*ekatvam*.”

<sup>18</sup> This verse is identical with Brihad. U. 4.4.10. Here the expressions “matter” and “spirit” are a gloss on *avidyā* and *vidyā*. What is meant by *avidyā* and *vidyā* is vital. Shankara says *avidyā* refers to ritual action (*karma*) as described in the *Vedas*. He says *vidyā* is a kind of inferior knowledge that deals with knowledge of how to attain the realm of the gods (*devas*). Madhva disagrees and says that *avidyā* is ignorance of the proper means of worship and *vidyā* is true knowledge. But why do those who have true knowledge go to an even worse place than those with improper knowledge? Madhva says that if those with true knowledge fail to speak out against those who worship improperly they themselves go to hell. I have interpreted *avidyā* as matter and *vidyā* as spirit. To answer the question as to why those who only focus on spirit go to “even deeper darkness” means that one cannot live successfully in this world without coming to terms with matter in terms of an understanding of the basic rules of medicine, hygiene, agriculture, etc. Without basic material knowledge one’s spiritual knowledge in this world is deficient and even more dangerous than mere material knowledge.

<sup>19</sup> The meaning is that the Supreme cannot be attained by either *vidyā* or *avidyā* alone. The following verse says that they must be applied together.

*avidyayā mṛtyum tīrtvā vidyayā 'mṛtam aśnute//*

One who possesses both matter as well as spirit, with matter transcends death and with spirit attains immortality.<sup>20</sup>

Text Twelve

*andham tamaḥ praviśanti ye 'sambhūtim upāsate/  
tato bhūya eva te tamo ya u sambhūtyām ratāḥ*

Those who see the world as devoid of substance enter blinding darkness. But those who delight in seeing the world as full of substance enter an even greater darkness.<sup>21</sup>

Text Thirteen

*anyad evahūḥ sambhavād anyad āhur asambhavāt/  
iti śuśrūma dhīrāṇām ye na tad vicacakṣire//*

One is the result of non-being and the other is the of result of being. This we have learned from the wise.<sup>22</sup>

Text Fourteen

*sambhūtim ca vināśam ca yas tad vedobhayam saha/  
vināśena mṛtyum tīrtvā sambhūtyā amṛtam aśnute//*

---

<sup>20</sup> This verse confirms the interpretation that both *avidyā* and *vidyā*, that is to say both phenomenal knowledge and spiritual knowledge together, are necessary for true spiritual development.

<sup>21</sup> Here the expressions “devoid of substance” and “full of substance” are a gloss on the terms *asambhūti* and *sambhūti* respectively. Literally *sambhūti* means birth, creation, production, existence, etc. *Asambhūti* is destruction, dissolution, non-existence, etc. The terms are opposites and so suggest two ways of perceiving reality: in positive terms and in negative terms. The precise meaning of these terms, however, is unclear and translators have suggested a wide range of interpretations: non-becoming and becoming (Hume), immanent and transcendent (Mascaro), unmanifest *prakṛiti* and manifested *Hiranya-garbha* (Nikkilananda), uncreated and created nature (Roer), the unmanifest and the manifest (Radhakrishnan) and even the uncompound and the compounded (Zaehner). Shankara interprets *asambhūti* as material nature in its unmanifest form prior to creation (*avyakta- prakṛiti*) and *sambhūti* as the source of material nature (*hiranya-garbha*). Madhva interprets *asambhūti* and *sambhūti* as Vishnu acting in two capacities, as destroyer and creator respectively. In whatever way one chooses to translate these terms the *Upanishad* says that the Absolute includes both pair of opposites. It is simultaneously existence and non-existence, creation and destruction, being and non-being. A lover of Truth must accept both principals.

<sup>22</sup> In this verse the terms have shifted from *asambhūti* and *sambhūti* to *asambhava* and *sambhava*. According to Shankara *asambhava* and *sambhava* are the equivalent of *asambhūti* and *sambhūti*.

One who understands the world both in terms of substance as well as destruction, with destruction crosses death and with substance attains immortality.<sup>23</sup>

*A prayer from the soul who departs this world*

Text Fifteen

*hiraṇmayena pātreṇa satyasyāpihitam mukham/  
tat tvam pūṣann apāvṛṇu satya-dharmāya dṛṣṭaye//*

O Sustainer of the Universe<sup>24</sup> your glowing radiance<sup>25</sup> covers your face of truth. O God of light, I am a lover of truth. I now wish to see you. Please reveal yourself.<sup>26</sup>

Text Sixteen

*pūṣann ekarṣe yama sūrya prājāpatya vyūha raśmīn samūha tejah/  
yat te rūpam kalyāṇatamaṁ tat te paśyāmi yo 'śāv asau puruṣaḥ so 'ham asmi//*

O Sustainer, sole seer, controller, O Sun, O Creative Principle<sup>27</sup> disperse your glaring radiance, gather together your light. I wish to behold your most wonderful form, that most distance person of which I am a part.<sup>28</sup>

Text Seventeen

*vāyur anilam amṛtam athedam bhasmāntam śarīram/  
aum krato smara kṛtam smara krato smara kṛtam smara//*

O Supreme,<sup>29</sup> my breath to the immortal wind, this body to ashes.

---

<sup>23</sup> As in verse 10 the Supreme cannot be attained by one or the other, but only in combination. How does an understanding of the destructive principal help overcome death? Shankara says it leads to the destructions of one's vices and other faults that force one to be continually reborn into this world.

<sup>24</sup> "O Sustainer of the Universe" is a translation of Pushan, a Vedic deity identified with the sun and therefore the surveyor of all things. This deity is also the conductor on journeys to the next world. Madhva say Pushan is Vishnu and not the sun.

<sup>25</sup> "Glowing radiance" (*hiraṇmayena pātreṇa*) is literally "by a golden vessel". Some commentators interpret this as the sun.

<sup>26</sup> Verses 15 to 18 are to be recited at the time of death or during the funeral ceremony.

<sup>27</sup> "O creative principal" is literally "descendent of Prajāpati" (*prājāpatya*).

<sup>28</sup> "That most distance person of which I am a part" (*yo 'śāv asau puruṣaḥ so 'ham asmi*) is literally "that yonder person, he I am".

<sup>29</sup> "O Supreme" is a gloss on "Om."

O guiding intelligence, remember all that I have done. O grand design<sup>30</sup>, remember my deeds. Do not forget me.

Text Eighteen

*agne naya supathā rāye asmān viśvāni deva vayunāni vidvān/  
yuyodhy asmaj juhurāṇam eno bhūyiṣṭhām te nama-uktim vidhema//*

O Agni<sup>31</sup>, lead me to prosperity. O God, you alone know the way. Forgive my sins.<sup>32</sup> To you I offer unlimited prayer.

---

<sup>30</sup> “O guiding intelligence” and “O grand design” are both a translation of “*krato*,” which is literally plan, design, intelligence, enlightenment, etc.

<sup>31</sup> “Agni is the fire deity and since the body is cremated the prayer is to God as fire.

<sup>32</sup> “Forgive my sins.” (*yuyodhy asmaj juhurāṇam*) is literally “overcome or battle our crooked ways.”