

## Study of the Isha Upanishad

### **Introduction:**

This is considered one of the oldest Upanishads. As such it is difficult to fix the date of the Upanishads. But, we can compare the subject matter, and the style of the different Upanishads and infer their relative dates. In this sense, tradition says that Isha Upanishads is one of the oldest.

This is also the most commented upon Upanishads. Literally hundreds of commentaries are available in print on this small Upanishad. Of course, Acharya Shankara's commentary is considered the best among all of them. English translations of Shankara's Bhashya on this Upanishad are also available by various publishing houses, the most popular of them being the ones from Ramakrishna Mission. However, we will present here below a commentary based on Swami Vivekananda's perspective.

Is Swamiji's perspective, then, different from the traditionally accepted Shankara's perspective? Didn't Swamiji himself assert many times that he accepted Shankara's commentaries and the resulting Advaita Vedanta philosophy in toto?

Swamiji did indeed accept Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy in toto, but he did extend it further! We will need to understand the historical background from which Shankara and Swamiji came. During Shankara's time, the religious atmosphere in India was a total mess; a variation and reformation of the ancient Hindu religion was found to be strongly appealing to the people in India; it was called Buddhism. Due to certain inherent problems in the way Buddhism was initiated and nurtured, too much freedom was accorded to anybody and everybody, incorporating their hideous practices into Buddhism, and the common people were enamoured by the extremely sensual and utterly degrading hedonic practices. All forms of the ancient Hindu religions – Shakta, Vaishnava, Shaiva and Tantra religions, mainly – were coloured by this utterly decadent practices. And to top it all, Buddhism asserted that nothing existed in the final analysis!

In this historical background, Shankara was born. His mission in life was to establish the positive goal and ideal of Brahman in the Hindu religion. He went back to the Upanishads to do this, for the Upanishads clearly state the Brahman is the source, substratum and the reality of all existence. Shankara achieved his mission by writing commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita. He also instituted ritualistic worship of the five-categories of deities – Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, Surya and Ganapati. Lastly, he set up monasteries in the four regions of India – Sringeri, Puri, Dwarka, and Badrinath. Through his commentaries, Shankara established that spiritual practise should lead us to the positive experience of Brahman, and not an experience of nihilism or Nothing. The culmination of moral and spiritual practices is a state of consciousness called Nirvikalpa Samadhi. He went to great lengths to establish that all the Upanishads speak uniformly of the Brahman and of the unique state of Nirvikalpa Samadhi. In fact, the impulse behind every statement Shankara made was to reclaim India from the stranglehold of Buddhist views of nihilism and crass materialism. The degraded forms of Buddhism asserted that the spiritual goal can be achieved by means of intense and complete indulgence in the senses! Shankara established, from scriptural basis, from logic, and from experience (*Sruti*, *Yukti*, and *Anubhava*) that renunciation is indispensable for spiritual growth. Religion begins with beating a retreat from the senses. There is no meaning in saying

that one will make spiritual progress by indulging in the senses. This was akin to saying that a dirty cloth can be washed clean by using mud and coal-dust!

Shankara did an incredible job of cleaning the dross from the Indian social, religious and spiritual landscape. He injected such an amazing amount of energy into his commentaries that his life has become a watershed in Indian history. No more could anyone convince the Indians in fancy ideas of religion. The ancient Upanishad tradition was revived and firmly established by Shankara.

Shankara's mission led to a small problem. He was hell bent on showing that nowhere in the Upanishads was there any reference of mixing this world and the inner world. We find Shankara taking a hardstand in this regard, much as Jesus did when he said, '*No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else, he will hold to one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.*'<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Shankara would stick to rational expression from beginning to end. Life, however, is not purely logical. In life, we are unable to demarcate the purely worldly from the purely spiritual. The transcendent nature of Reality is clear from the Upanishads, when we study them from the lens that Shankara provides for us in his commentaries. But the path to reach that transcendent ideal is through this less-than-ideal world. Shankara instituted two separate paths for lifting man from perceiving multiplicity to experiencing Nirvikalpa Samadhi – the '*Neti, neti*' path (the Via Negativa or the Apophatic path), and the '*Iti, iti*' path (the Via Positiva or the Cataphatic path). The forces of history against which Shankara fought prevented a full flowering of these two paths. While the practitioners of the Via Negativa, in the post-Shankara period, demonstrated that they indeed experienced Nirvikalpa Samadhi, those who followed the Via Positiva in the same period, seemed to have systematically missed the same experience. Although many in the latter path had significantly high experiences, they all seemed to stagnate at the Personal God level. So, a few centuries after Shankara, the common perception seemed to have been that Nirvikalpa Samadhi is the only true religion, the highest spiritual experience possible, and it is achievable only by following the Via Negativa, and that all other spiritual experiences of Personal God achievable through the Via Positiva, are lower than Nirvikalpa Samadhi.

Swami Vivekananda initiated two important course corrections in this religious situation in India.

1. Samadhi is an infinitely graded experience. Nirvikalpa Samadhi is but one particular experience in a spectrum of experiences that occur in the consciousness of man, beyond his body, senses, and mind. Visions of various divine beings are also as valid as Nirvikalpa Samadhi, insofar as spiritual experience is concerned. Swamiji goes one step further and emphasises that even without spiritual visions and experiences of Samadhi, formation of a robust character itself is valid outcome of spiritual practices.
2. While a select few in the world will be temperamentally suited for the Via Negativa, almost everyone in this world is constitutionally suited for Via Positiva. The only catch here is that following the Via Positiva necessitates that the person believes in the existence of, and consequently, in the worship of, a divine Being, a Personal God, called Ishta.

The fall-out from these course corrections given by Swamiji are innumerable. In fact, as time passes, the fall-outs increase. That is one of the characteristics of the power of the

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<sup>1</sup> *New Testament: Matthew: 6.24*

Avatara. Situated as we are, removed from the Prophet by just a century, we are able to see but a few consequences. We point out a couple of the outcomes of Swamiji's message:

- Since the '*Iti-iti-marga*' is also an equally valid spiritual path, it lends itself to the divinization of daily life in society. If '*Neti-neti-marga*' alone is the valid spiritual path, and if all other perspectives are the product of ignorance, as we believed for over 1000 years, then leading a spiritual life necessitates that we turn our backs to society. Nothing that is a part of the national or international economy can ever be a part of the spiritual path. For, won't it take us away from God?
- Vedanta has two distinct, yet intimately connected aspects. One aspect of Vedanta deals with the consciousness within me. The second aspect of Vedanta deals with my dealing with the whole world. Historical developments had led to the presentation of Vedanta as having only one aspect – the internal vision aspect. And this presentation, especially by Shankara was so forceful that it has imprinted itself in the minds of almost the whole of the nation.
- Buddha had, on the other hand, had emphasized the external vision aspect of Vedanta. He did not care much for the internal vision aspect at all.
- Swamiji had the duty marked out for him, where he welded both these aspects of Vedanta and presented a complete system. We note that in almost all of his lectures delivered on Western soil, Swamiji spoke about the Atman, and how to realise it in one's life. When he returned to India, in all the lectures that he delivered on Indian soil, he spoke about man-making, how to interact with one another, and how-to live-in-society. We ask ourselves, did the same person deliver both these sets of lectures? Moreover, why should a man of religion engage himself with mundane issues such as man-making, human interactions, and social life? The answer is – Vedanta has **both these aspects** to it. Vedanta deals with the Atman. Vedanta also deals with the whole world, as a manifestation of the Atman.
- In the last 1000 years of our history, we have completely ignored the latter aspect of Vedanta, and have emphasised only the former aspect of Vedanta. As a result, genuinely spiritual persons were continuously produced in our society even during periods when our society was down in the dregs. Now the time has come to emphasise both aspects of Vedanta equally. Hence Swamiji gave us the motto: *Atmano mokshartham jagadhitaya cha* (for the salvation of one's own soul, and for the welfare of the whole world).
- He started two separate institutions for this end. Ramakrishna Math would concentrate of developing the inner world within its members. Ramakrishna Mission would concentrate of serving the whole world as a manifestation of Atman.

The question that now arises is – did Swamiji institute a new path for mankind? We opine that Swamiji was merely aligning himself with the Upanishads. In the Upanishads, we already had this dual-aspect of Vedanta highlighted and emphasized. For reasons mentioned above, Shankara hesitated from recognising this dual-aspect of Vedanta, and laid inordinately great emphasis on the inner-world aspect of Vedanta, to the utter exclusion of this world. Shankara carries a lot of prestige with him. If he says something, and if anyone else says something else, more often than not, it is Shankara's version that wins the day. Hence this

question keeps on coming up again and again, if Swamiji did not deviate from Shankara in instituting the dual-aspect of Vedanta. It is mainly to clear up this confusion that the following explanation of Isha Upanishad is being done. This explanation is intended to clear the haze that surrounds the important term Vedanta.

In this context, Swami Turiyananda makes an apposite observation: “*When we studied the scriptures we thought that the attainment of nirvana was the supreme ideal. Afterwards, when we came to Sri Ramakrishna, I was struck dumb when I heard the Master chastise us for holding this ideal. He called it low. But I had great faith in his words. So I proceeded and later realized the truth of his teaching. The love of God that comes after Samadhi, after realizing God’s true nature, is devotion mixed with knowledge. There is a higher state than this in which pure devotion and true faith arise spontaneously. This state is beyond the faculty of reasoning.*”<sup>2</sup>

Swamiji makes the following observation and sound his warning to Indians in this context: *In Buddha we had the great, universal heart and infinite patience, making religion practical and bringing it to everyone’s door. In Shankaracharya we saw tremendous intellectual power, throwing the scorching light of reason upon everything. We want today that bright sun of intellectuality joined with the heart of Buddha, the wonderful infinite heart of love and mercy. This union will give us the highest philosophy. Science and religion will meet and shake hands. Poetry and philosophy will become friends. This will be the religion of the future, and if we can work it out, we may be sure that it will be for all times and peoples. This is the one way that will prove acceptable to modern science, for it has almost come to it<sup>3</sup>...Young men of Lahore, understand this, therefore, this great sin hereditary and national, is on our shoulders. There is no hope for us. You may make thousands of societies, twenty thousand political assemblages, fifty thousand institutions. These will be of no use until there is that sympathy, that love, that heart that thinks for all; until Buddha’s heart comes once more into India, until the words of the Lord Krishna are brought to their practical use, there is no hope for us.*<sup>4</sup>

The characteristic feature of Hindu scriptures is dialogue. There is a knowledgeable person, the Guru, and there is a qualified, inquisitive person, the disciple. The disciple asks a question, based on his entire life’s experience. That question is so deep, it awakens the full blast of wisdom in the Guru, which he expounds as an answer. This dialogue is recorded as an Upanishad. Sometimes the names of the Guru and the disciple are mentioned, sometimes not. The Isha Upanishad, Mandukya Upanishad and the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Taittiriya Upanishad do not follow this pattern. No question is asked, but highly illuminating passages are recorded. How do we account for this? It is possible that due to exigent circumstances, the more elaborate conversations were lost and what remained was a gist of the same in the form of Isha, Mandukya and the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Taittiriya. These three scriptures, therefore, appear to be cliff-notes of more elaborate dialogues which are no longer available.

We now begin the explanation of the mantras of Isha Upanishad. This explanation needs to be read along with the Shankara Bhashya on this Upanishad, as translated by Swami Nikhilananda in ‘The Upanishads’, which is available from Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata.<sup>5</sup> One

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<sup>2</sup> *Conversations with Swami Turiyananda*: Sw Raghavananda & Sw Prabhavananda: Pg-15; Entry on 9<sup>th</sup> July 1915

<sup>3</sup> Complete Works: Vol-2: *Jnana Yoga*: Ch-VI

<sup>4</sup> Complete Works: Vol-3: *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*: The Vedanta: The Absolute & Manifestation

<sup>5</sup> [https://estudentdavedanta.net/Swami%20Nikhilananda%20-%20Upanishads%20I%20-%20Katha,%20Isa,%20Kena,%20Mundaka%20\[English\].pdf](https://estudentdavedanta.net/Swami%20Nikhilananda%20-%20Upanishads%20I%20-%20Katha,%20Isa,%20Kena,%20Mundaka%20[English].pdf)

more book that should accompany this present study of the Isha Upanishad is ‘The Message of the Upanishads’ by Swami Ranganathananda, also published by Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata.<sup>6</sup>

**1. All this – whatever exists in this changing universe – should be covered by the Lord. Protect the Self by renunciation. Lust not after any man’s wealth.**  
(Translation based on Shankara’s Bhashya)

Whatever there is changeful in this ephemeral world, all that must be enveloped by the Lord. By this renunciation, support yourself. Do not covet the wealth of anyone. (Direct translation of mantra by Swami Ranganathananda)

This mantra is the most commented mantra in all the Upanishads.

What makes this mantra so contentious?

Recall what we mentioned in the Introduction about serving God and Mammon together. The ancient Hindu conception was the ‘*Iti, iti*’ path, the Via Positiva.

There is a highly illuminating passage from a lecture<sup>7</sup> Swamiji delivered in Alameda in 1900, where he says: *What is practical religion, then? To get to that state – freedom, the attainment of freedom. And this world, if it helps us on to that goal, is all right; if not – if it begins to bind one more layer on the thousands already there, it becomes an evil. Possessions, learning, beauty, everything else – as long as they help us to that goal, they are of practical value. When they have ceased helping us on to that goal of freedom, they are a positive danger. What is practical religion, then? Utilise the things of this world and the next just for one goal – the attainment of freedom. Every enjoyment, every ounce of pleasure is to be bought by the expenditure of the infinite heart and mind combined.*

Look at the translation of this mantra that we have given above. This is a true translation of the mantra according to Shankara’s tradition, done by Swami Nikhilananda. Shankara had great aversion to the use of the word ‘*Bhunjita*’ in its meaning as ‘enjoyment’ or ‘experiences’. As we mentioned, this aversion sprung from the terrible degradation of the Hindu religion in the post Buddhist period. The hideous practices of the incoming tribes, which were indiscriminately incorporated into Buddhism and later on into Hinduism were all based on unbridled sensuality. So, Shankara scrupulously avoided the meaning ‘enjoy’ or ‘experience’ in the original Sanskrit word ‘*Bhunjita*’. The simple fact is – this word ‘*Bhunjita*’ means ‘enjoy’ or ‘experience’. So, how does one ‘enjoy’ or ‘experience’ the Self by renunciation? That is what Swamiji has explained in the passage quoted above: *Utilise the things of this world and the next just for one goal – the attainment of freedom. Every enjoyment, every ounce of pleasure is to be bought by the expenditure of the infinite heart and mind combined.*

In an amazing article on this Upanishad, Swami Pavitrananda<sup>8</sup> says the following: *Rabindranath Tagore once wrote a poem which created a sensation. He was a poet who would write many things, and it might be that people did not understand it, or that he gave it a direction which was simply a poetic feeling but not practical. In this*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://shop.advaitaashrama.org/product/the-message-of-the-upanishads/>

<sup>7</sup> Complete Works: Vol-4: Lectures & Discourses: *The Practice of Religion*

<sup>8</sup> *Prabuddha Bharata*: July 2022 issue: Pp:26-32

*poem he was decrying the spirit of complete renunciation, that one should not take to monastic life and become a monk.*

*He wrote: “Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight. I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight. Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy, and all my desires ripen into fruits of love.”*

*It looks very nice and has a poetic feeling. But we do not live in a dreamland. Life is a reality, but he says that amidst all bondages we shall feel the touch of liberation. How can you do that, through all bondages, when your hands and feet are tied? In the world everyone is a slave, more or less. There is a Bengali song: ‘We are working like a galley slave. There is no consideration of hot or cold weather; there is no consideration of sickness or good health. We are passing through great drudgery in life. And for what? It seems, as if we are working like a galley slave.’ But when you feel that way, that you are compelled to work by circumstances, you do not feel the touch of liberation. It is a dry thing when you feel the touch of bondage, when you are not free. This poetic feeling does not really help you.*

*And at the same time, you should not shut out your senses from running after sense objects; through sights, sounds, and through fragrance, all the beautiful things that are for enjoyment. Amidst all these things we shall feel the touch of God. Then what is the difference between a person who is enveloped in gross enjoyment and a saint? The saint enjoys the Divine Presence. What is the difference between him and an ordinary person who is wallowing in gross pleasures? The ordinary person also can say that, for it is simply a poetic feeling. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: ‘First, be earnest to realise God, and when you have realised God, you will enjoy the whole world. Then only will you see that the whole world is a reflection of God.’ It requires hard practice, but without that it is simply a poetic feeling. They omit the middle thing, the hard spiritual practices by which we shall actually realise that the world is pervaded by God. Then, and not before, can you say, as Swami Vivekananda said: ‘All this is His manifold presence before thee.’ So, those who cannot think, those who are not earnest about realising God, they will say all these things, and they try to explain the verse in their own way. But the next verse explains the difficulty.*

As is clear from Pavitrananda’s explanation, everything depends on the goal a man sets for his own life. If it is spiritual, then renunciation is the means of enjoying. But, enjoying what? This world? No. Then the goal can never be spiritual. You cannot wash dirt with dirt, ever. We will have to use this very world, these very senses, and discern the Self from within them. Some of the other Upanishads are even more candid about this fact. Katha Upanishad<sup>9</sup> says: *It is through Atman that one knows form, taste, smell, sounds, touches and carnal pleasures. Is there anything that remains unknown to Atman? This, verily, is That.* In so far as it is necessary for discerning Atman, we will be utilising the senses. Note how the Upanishads include carnal pleasures also in the description! The Upanishad implies that there is nothing inherently wrong or evil with anything concerning man, or his mind, or his senses. What is wrong is the tendency to grab and possess; especially more than one needs. Who will draw the line here? Who will decide that this much is enough for a person and no more is needed for him? One’s

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<sup>9</sup> Katha Upanishad: 2:1:3

own innate sense of proportion, keyed to the realisation of the spiritual ideal will be the guide and standard. Recall how Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly said: *After the birth of one or two children, the husband and wife should live as brother and sister.*<sup>10</sup> Unless one engages in carnal activity, how can one or two children be born? So, engaging in carnal activity is not wrong or evil, per se. What is wrong in this matter is to repeatedly engage in carnal activity, because one lacks self-control. This condition is today recognised by modern medical field as sex-addiction, with approved treatment protocols. Tiger Woods, the great Golfer, and Bill Clinton, the ex-American President are famous people who suffered from this medical condition.

Let us listen to Swami Vivekananda explain this ancient conception of spiritual life in his lecture ‘God in everything’<sup>11</sup>:

*The Vedanta does not in reality denounce the world. The ideal of renunciation nowhere attains such a height as in the teachings of the Vedanta. But, at the same time, dry suicidal advice is not intended; it 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. Thus, we have to give up the world, and when the world is given up, what remains? God. What is meant? You can have your wife; it does not mean that you are to abandon her, but that you are to see God in the wife. Give up your children; what does that mean? To turn them out of doors, as some human brutes do in every country? Certainly not. That is diabolism; it is not religion. But see God in your children. So, in everything. In life and in death, in happiness and in misery, the Lord is equally present. The whole world is full of the Lord. Open your eyes and see Him. This is what Vedanta teaches. Give up the world which you have conjectured, because your conjecture was based upon a very partial experience, upon very poor reasoning, and upon your own weakness. Give it up; the world we have been thinking of so long, the world to which we have been clinging so long, is a false world of our own creation. Give that up; open your eyes and see that as such it never existed; it was a dream, Maya. What existed was the Lord Himself. It is He who is in the child, in the wife, and in the husband; it is He who is in the good and in the bad; He is in the sin and in the sinner; He is in life and in death.*

*A tremendous assertion indeed! Yet that is the theme which the Vedanta wants to demonstrate, to teach, and to preach. This is just the opening theme.*

*We all understand that desires are wrong, but what is meant by giving up desires? How could life go on? It would be the same suicidal advice, killing the desire and the man too. The solution is this. Not that you should not have property, not that you should not have things which are necessary and things which are even luxuries. Have all that you want, and more, only know the truth and realise it. Wealth does not*

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<sup>10</sup> *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: Chapter-The Master’s Birthday; Entry on Sunday, February 22, 1885

<sup>11</sup> Complete Works: Vol-2: Jnana Yoga: Ch-VII: *God in Everything*

*belong to anybody. Have no idea of proprietorship, possession. You are nobody, nor am I, nor anyone else. All belongs to the Lord, because the opening verse told us to put the Lord in everything. God is in the wealth that you enjoy. He is in the desire that rises in your mind. He is in the things you buy to satisfy your desire; He is in your beautiful attire, in your beautiful ornaments. This is the line of thought. All will be metamorphosed as soon as you begin to see things in that light. If you put God in your every movement, in your conversation, in your form, in everything, the whole scene changes, and the world, instead of appearing as one of woe and misery, will become a heaven.*

*'The kingdom of heaven is within you,' says Jesus; so says the Vedanta, and every great teacher. 'He that hath eyes to see, let him see, and he that hath ears to hear, let him hear.' The Vedanta proves that the truth for which we have been searching all this time is present, and was all the time with us. In our ignorance, we thought we had lost it, and went about the world crying and weeping, struggling to find the truth, while all along it was dwelling in our own hearts. There alone can we find it.*

*If we understand the giving up of the world in its old, crude sense, then it would come to this: that we must not work, that we must be idle, sitting like lumps of earth, neither thinking nor doing anything, but must become fatalists, driven about by every circumstance, ordered about by the laws of nature, drifting from place to place. That would be the result. But that is not what is meant. We must work. Ordinary mankind, driven everywhere by false desire, what do they know of work? The man propelled by his own feelings and his own senses, what does he know about work? He works, who is not propelled by his own desires, by any selfishness whatsoever. He works, who has no ulterior motive in view. He works, who has nothing to gain from work.*

*When we have given up desires, then alone shall we be able to read and enjoy this universe of God. Then everything will become deified. Nooks and corners, by-ways and shady places, which we thought dark and unholy, will be all deified. They will all reveal their true nature, and we shall smile at ourselves and think that all this weeping and crying has been but child's play, and we were only standing by, watching.*

This is a ground-breaking achievement by Swamiji. The danger in India arises from plunging headlong into sensuality in the name of deifying the world. Even from the most ancient times in India, as recorded in the Upanishads, the point of conflict in religion has always been how much importance to be given to the Ideal and how to the real world? When Indians found that they cannot safely strike a balance between the two, the then leaders of society guided people towards complete renunciation of the world and to plunge into the inner world. This kept up a constant flow of spiritually realised souls in our society at all times. Then came Buddha. He said that there was no sense in practicing religion in this manner, and proclaimed that it is far better to serve one's fellow beings than to isolate oneself and pray for one's own salvation. Buddha's call touched millions of hearts and over a period of time, it started taking the shape that there was no need to give-up the world to achieve spiritual goals. Engaged with this world itself, one could reach spiritual goals! In 500 years, people ended up concluding the exact opposite of what the Bhagavan preached! So, to clear up this confusion, Acharya Shankara once again went to the other extreme of claiming that even the least bit of engagement with this world will deprive you of spiritual knowledge! This was necessary to purify the dirty environment in Indian society during the post-Buddhist



decadence. He has been able to do that with incredible efficiency, as we can learn from studying the beliefs of the people at present. In India, serious spiritual aspirants still believe that real religion can be had only by all-renouncing monks and nuns. The rest of the married folks are on an interminable journey of purification. It is interminable because, each time they purify themselves by visiting holy men or holy places, they again come back to their family, which is impure! Family life is impure! This is the deep-rooted belief on the common Indian today. No amount of political revolt or economic reformation will raise up a society when its members feel that life in society is impure and degrading! There is an extremely delicate balance between using this world and renouncing this world. Throughout the Lectures from Colombo to Almora, it is this fine balance that Swamiji strove to teach to the Indians.

Swamiji undertook the arduous task of staying clear of the post-Buddhist degradation and at the same time, correcting the post-Shankara conclusion that married life and life in society is impure. And the scriptural basis for this attempt by Swamiji is to be found here, in the mantras of Isha Upanishad.

What is noteworthy in this mantra is the dictum – **Enjoy this life by renunciation**. We understand that in order to enjoy this life, we need to possess and protect things, people and intangibles. If we renounce, can we enjoy? I have a wife and a son; I enjoy my relations with them. If I renounce my wife and son, how can I enjoy life? In this mantra, the Upanishad Rishi is hinting at a whole new level of enjoyment. None of our possessions need to be renounced. But, our attitude towards everything we possess can be altered and an attitude of **service** enters into our sense of possession. Everything that we possess as ours calls for our dedicated service. It is no longer a matter of ‘using’ something or someone; it is now a matter of serving something or someone. Utility has to be gauged in terms of the service we offer to something or someone. Academic knowledge, for instance. It is quite possible that we can grow arrogant about the knowledge we possess. And in order to escape from this egotism, we might have to renounce acquiring knowledge all together. This mantra opens up a new avenue in this regard. The mantra says, ‘Acquire more and more knowledge; but acquire it only to give it to others, not to hoard and grow arrogant.’ The same thing applies to everything that we can possess, be it persons, things, or intangibles. Swamiji thundered, “*The secret lies there. The national ideals of India are **Renunciation** and **Service**. Intensify her in those channels, and the rest will take care of itself. The banner of the spiritual cannot be raised too high in this country. In it alone is salvation.*”<sup>12</sup> This is the real translation and meaning of this Upanishad mantra. *Bhunjita* is to be translated as ‘Service’. Enjoyment can be seen as a graded concept. What starts as a sensory experience, graduates into dedicated service, and at each stage, it is indeed enjoyment.

In a poignant statement, Swamiji says: *The highest Advaita cannot be brought down to practical life. Advaita made practical, works from the plane of Vishishtadvaita.*<sup>13</sup> This mantra is the best example for the principle that Swamiji stated so beautifully. I exist. God exists. And this world exists. The effort will be to merge both myself and this world in God. That is *Vishishtadvaita*. If I don’t have an existence separate from God and if the world also doesn’t have an existence separate from God, that is Advaita. So, Advaita, if it has to be made practical, like it has been done in this mantra, it takes the form of *Vishishtadvaita*.

<sup>12</sup> Complete Works: Vol-5: Interviews: *Reawakening of Hinduism on a National Basis* (Prabuddha Bharata, Sept 1898)

<sup>13</sup> Complete Works: Vol-6: Notes of Class Talks & Lectures: *Notes taken down in Madras, 1892-93*

Swamiji says: *The infinite human soul can never be satisfied but by the Infinite itself. Infinite desire can only be satisfied by infinite knowledge — nothing short of that. Worlds will come and go. What of that? The soul lives and for ever expands. Worlds must come into the soul. Worlds must disappear in the soul like drops in the ocean. And this world to become the goal of the soul! If we have common sense, we cannot be satisfied, though this has been the theme of the poets in all the ages, always telling us to be satisfied. And nobody has been satisfied yet! Millions of prophets have told us, “Be satisfied with your lot”; poets sing. We have told ourselves to be quiet and satisfied, yet we are not. It is the design of the Eternal that there is nothing in this world to satisfy my soul, nothing in the heavens above, and nothing beneath. Before the desire of my soul, the stars and the worlds, upper and lower, the whole universe, is but a hateful disease, nothing but that. That is the meaning. Everything is an evil unless that is the meaning. Every desire is evil unless that is the meaning, unless you understand its true importance, its goal. All nature is crying through all the atoms for one thing – its perfect freedom.*<sup>14</sup> Hence, we don’t have any other option but to **cover by the Lord all this – whatever exists in this changing universe.** For, the Infinite Soul will be satisfied only by the Infinite Lord, and not by anything else.

- 2. If a man wishes to live a hundred years on this earth, he should live performing action. For you, who cherish such a desire and regard yourself as a man, there is no other way by which you can keep work from clinging to you. (Translation based on Shankara’s Bhashya)**

In this world, one should desire to live a 100 years, but only by performing actions. Thus, and in no other way, can man be free from the taint of actions. (Direct translation by Swami Ranganathananda)

Swamiji gives his commentary on this mantra in his ‘God in everything’ lecture, which we will quote here verbatim:<sup>15</sup>

*So, do your work, says the Vedanta. It first advises us how to work – by giving up – giving up the apparent, illusive world. What is meant by that? Seeing God everywhere. Thus, do you work. Desire to live a hundred years, have all earthly desires, if you wish, only deify them, convert them into heaven. 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. If a man plunges headlong into foolish luxuries of the world without knowing the truth, he has missed his footing, he cannot reach the goal. And if a man curses the world, goes into a forest, mortifies his flesh, and kills himself little by little by starvation, makes his heart a barren waste, kills out all feelings, and becomes harsh, stern, and dried-up, that man also has missed the way. These are the two extremes, the two mistakes at either end. Both have lost the way, both have missed the goal.*

*So work, says the Vedanta, putting God in everything, and knowing Him to be in everything. Work incessantly, holding life as something deified, as God Himself, and knowing that this is all we have to do, this is all we should ask for. God is in everything, where else shall we go to find Him? He is already in every work, in every thought, in*

<sup>14</sup> Complete Works: Vol-4: Lectures & Discourses: *The Practice of Religion*

<sup>15</sup> Complete Works: Vol-2: Jnana Yoga: Ch-VII: *God in Everything*

*every feeling. Thus knowing, we must work – this is the only way, there is no other. Thus, the effects of work will not bind us.*

*We have seen how false desires are the cause of all the misery and evil we suffer, but when they are thus deified, purified, through God, they bring no evil, they bring no misery. Those who have not learnt this secret will have to live in a demoniacal world until they discover it. Many do not know what an infinite mine of bliss is in them, around them, everywhere; they have not yet discovered it. What is a demoniacal world? The Vedanta says, ignorance.*

*We are dying of thirst sitting on the banks of the mightiest river. We are dying of hunger sitting near heaps of food. Here is the blissful universe, yet we do not find it. We are in it all the time, and we are always mistaking it. Religion proposes to find this out for us. The longing for this blissful universe is in all hearts. It has been the search of all nations, it is the one goal of religion, and this ideal is expressed in various languages in different religions. It is only the difference of language that makes all these apparent divergences. One expresses a thought in one way, another a little differently, yet perhaps each is meaning exactly what the other is expressing in a different language.*

We may raise one question here: the import of this mantra seems to be like this: You should wish to live for 100 years; and all this while, you should engage in productive, meaningful work; what is productive, meaningful work? It is as mentioned in the 1<sup>st</sup> mantra – everything a man does should be covered with God; doing work in such a manner alone will prevent work from clinging to you. In the light of this import of this mantra, what if we say – no work will cling to me if I renounce work entirely! Why should I go through the rigmarole of covering everything with God, and then wishing to keep on working for my entire life?

In ancient India, all work was considered as extremely holy, pure. We did not have a conception of retirement at all. Note that the four Ashrama concept (*Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa*) of a man's life does not fit into the worldview underlying this mantra. Notice also that the conception of work in the Ramakrishna Order of monks, as instituted by Swami Vivekananda, is along these lines of the Upanishad. Monks in Ramakrishna Math and Mission do not necessarily retire at a particular age. Thus, it is quite common to see an octogenarian or nonagenarian monk of the Order travelling all over the world, engaged in some form of the Mission's work.

Looking at this mantra, one is amazed to note that the question of work tormented the minds of those ancient Hindu Rishis too. Should a man work his whole life? Or should he work for only a portion of his life and then enjoy leisure and freedom from work for the remainder of his life? Since the Age of Reason, and the Industrial revolution, some of the finest brains have grappled with this question. In 1885, William Morris wrote an illuminating essay '*Useful work versus useless toil*' where he argues that everyone is entitled to work in beautiful environment, and that work that is done only for livelihood is a waste of human energy.<sup>16</sup> Bertrand Russel acknowledges in his famous essay '*In praise of idleness*' that while some work is constitutionally necessary

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<sup>16</sup> Why Work? Arguments for the leisure society: *Useful Work versus Useless Toil* by William Morris: Pp-16

for all human beings, it is wrong to believe that work is the goal of life. He then says that economic well-being is closely connected to a man's freedom from work. A rich man can enjoy leisure, while a poor man simply cannot afford to be idle. Working hard makes a man rich and then he can remain idle, which makes him poor and he will need to work again, and so on.<sup>17</sup> Adam Smith, Bentham and Hume said that some people will work by contributing capital, and some will work by adding value to capital by producing goods or rendering services. This group of people decreed that since the one who brought capital risked more than the one who laboured, the greater share of the profits should go to the former. Karl Marx and Engels averred that no amount of capital is worth anything if the labourer doesn't enhance its value by his labour.<sup>18</sup> Hence the greater share of profits should go to the labourer. This is the way the modern world is grappling with work.

Contrast this with the Upanishad. It doesn't matter what work you do, as long as you do it as a consecration to the ever-present Lord. They never bothered about remuneration, or value-addition. They never knew what toil and useless work means. Every human activity was sacred to them, for every activity was a direct worship of the Lord. There was thus no question of boredom, leisure and retirement. A sense of worship, a sense of sacredness is the key. The present style of working in our society has completely removed sacredness with respect to work. All work is monetizable in the world today. It appears as though the tension regarding modern work is between Capitalism and Communism. But both are the same, since both believe that all human work can be monetised. After this fundamental belief of monetization of all human work, they start squabbling about who gets the money. Both have missed the point. All human work can never be fully monetised. A huge aspect of every human activity will necessarily remain beyond monetization. Those aspects are all sacred. We need to nurture those aspects when we work. That is the idea of this mantra.

One more issue in the context of this mantra: the ideal lifespan of a human being is 100 years. The mantra is very clear about this. Compare this conception with the lifespan mentioned in various scriptures all over the world. The Sumerian and Assyrian scriptures speak of kings who ruled for thousands of years at a stretch. The Hindu Puranas speak of many persons who lived for thousands of years. When the modern man reads these accounts, he starts to interpret it in strange ways, sometimes saying that time-lines were different in those ancient days, or that people indeed lived much longer in those days and that average lifespan has reduced subsequently. Isha Upanishad is acknowledged as one of the oldest Upanishads. And here it is clearly mentioned that the ideal lifespan of a person is 100 years.

As to the query we raised – why should we not renounce work totally, and thereby eliminate the possibility of being bound by work – it will be answered by the Upanishad itself in the next mantras.

### **3. Verily, those worlds of the asuras are enveloped in blind darkness; and thereto they all repair after death who are slayers of Atman.**

Human life is an amazing opportunity to discover the Atman. In fact, achieving anything other the Atman in this life is considered as 'spiritual suicide' by this

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid: *In praise of Idleness* by Bertrand Russel: Pp-8

<sup>18</sup> Ibid: *The Problem of Work* by Camillo Berneri: Pp-35

Upanishad. This is a foregone conclusion in India today. This goal for our life was fixed ages ago by the long succession of Rishis, Avatars and Acharyas in India. The acculturation process that leads to adopting Self-realisation as the goal of life is called 'Aryanization' in India. We must be careful not to confuse this word with the Nazi term. Ever since the Nazi Germans started using this term for their philosophy behind genocide and ethnic cleansing of Jews, the original meaning of this grand term has been lost.

Civilization does not occur automatically. There is a conscious impulse behind all civilizing activities. Ancient Indians discovered the principles of gradually civilizing newer and newer communities of people. This process has been called 'Aryanising' or 'making an Aryan out of a brute'. It begins by believing in Atman as the essence of a person. It might appear to be a simple idea, but it is backed by the direct perception of Atman by innumerable persons in India's long history. If a person believes in Atman as the reality of oneself, a tremendous change comes over one's whole life and transforms the person's interhuman relations. These two changes have a tremendous cumulative effect on the social atmosphere of the country.

For many centuries, India was at the very top of the comity of nations in the world. Historical developments for the last 1000 years slowly eroded this faith in the Atman and we know what trajectory our nation took until we have struck rock-bottom. Any country of the world could walk into this land and take political control of India. For some time, we were able to 'Aryanise' the invaders, as happened time and again, with the Bactrians, Huns, Tartars, Yavanas, Sassanians, Kidarites, Alchons, Scythians (Sakas), Nekas, etc. Then, when the Muslims came in by the same route, the incredible social process by which this Aryanization happened, had become defunct. We have now reached a position within our country, where, if we do not revive the unique and incredible process of Aryanization, as soon as possible, the whole Indian society will implode.

The word 'Asuras' in the mantra refers to those people within India or elsewhere in the world who were not Aryans, i.e., who did not believe in Atman. Devoid of this belief in Atman, the quality of life will be entirely different from that of an Aryan. If an 'Asura' awakens belief in Atman, he becomes a 'Sura', or 'Deva', or 'Arya'.

It is in the background of this history that we can appreciate Swamiji's words: *"This is the only work, to call upon mankind to 'Awake, arise, and stop not till the goal is reached'. It is renunciation, Tyaga, that is meant by religion, and nothing else<sup>19</sup> ... Too much of inactivity, too much of weakness, too much of hypnotism has been and is upon our race. O ye modern Hindus, de-hypnotise yourselves. The way to do that is found in your own sacred books. Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity<sup>20</sup> ... I direct my attention to the individual, to make him strong, to teach him that he himself is divine, and I call upon men to make themselves conscious of this divinity within. That is really the ideal – conscious or unconscious – of every religion."<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> Complete Works: Vol-8: Epistles – 4<sup>th</sup> Series: LXXXI: To Mr. J. J. Goodwin: 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1896

<sup>20</sup> Complete Works: Vol-3: Lectures from Colombo to Almora: *The Mission of the Vedanta*

<sup>21</sup> Complete Works: Vol-5: Interviews: *An Indian Yogi in London*

- 4. That non-dual Atman, though never stirring, is swifter than the mind. The senses cannot reach It, for It moves ever in front. Though standing still, It overtakes others who are running. Because of Atman, Vayu, the World Soul apportions the activities of all. (Translation based on Shankara's Bhashya)**

The Self is one. It is unmoving; yet It is faster than the mind. Thus, moving faster, It is beyond the reach of the senses. Ever steady, It outstrips all that run. By Its mere presence, the cosmic energy is enabled to sustain the activities of living beings. (Direct translation by Swami Ranganathananda)

- 5. It moves and moves not; It is far and likewise near. It is inside all this and It is outside all this.**

These two are very important mantras for two reasons. One – it attempts to describe Atman. Two – it talks about Shakti.

Reality is two-fold. All the Upanishads speak of this two-fold aspect of Reality. In the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, we find Sri Ramakrishna asserting this point repeatedly. 'Brahman and Shakti are identical.' 'There is no distinction between Brahman and Shakti.' 'Shakti and Shaktiman are identical.' The fearless explorations of the Upanishad Rishis led them to amazing facts. The world consists of three entities – matter, energy, and consciousness. Are these three independent entities? Or they evolutes and derivatives of one another? Do they have a separate creator? Or are they self-existent and self-explanatory? The Rishis found answers to these interesting questions.

Matter and energy are qualitatively the same. They are two forms of the same entity. Consciousness, however, is independent of matter and energy. Consciousness did not give rise to matter and energy. Neither did energy or matter give rise to consciousness. Matter-energy duality is given a generic name called 'Prana' in ancient Hindu terminology. This entity refers to everything that is manifested. Ancient Hindu philosophy refers to this entity by innumerable names – Hiranyagarbha, Prakriti, Prana, Devi, Vayu, Matarishva, Maya, Rayi, etc. Later Hindu philosophy popularised the term 'Shakti' for this same entity. Consciousness, on the other hand, had only a couple of terms throughout the long history of Hindu philosophy – Atman, Brahman, Purusha, Tat, and Sah.

There has always been a problem in describing the Atman. There is nothing that is similar to, or compares to, Atman. It is unique and singular. When we describe something, we always refer to something that is similar to it, thereby evoking pictures in the listener's mind, and leading him onto a conception of what we are describing. Suppose I want to describe an animal that I have seen, but you haven't yet seen. Look at the process of how I describe it to you.

I have seen a unique animal called 'Woolly Mammoth'. You see, it is very large, much like an elephant, but much larger than that. While the tusks of an elephant are more or less straight, giving it a benign look, those of the woolly mammoth are very long and curved upwards, giving it a menacing look. The body of the elephant has sparse hair on it. The woolly mammoth, on the other hand, is hirsute in the extreme. Naturally, it would help the woolly mammoth to be hirsute since it lived in the snow-capped north polar regions, and the elephant lives in tropical areas. The body colour of both animals is more or less the same.

I am sure, a more or less rough picture has started forming in your mind about the woolly mammoth.

A similar approach cannot be taken regarding the Atman. There is nothing that compares to Atman, using which, we can describe it. Hence every attempt at describing the Atman in the Upanishads employs either negative language or the language of contradictions. These two mantras are typical examples.

Atman does not move at all, and yet it is faster than the mind! Imagine something that matches this description. The five senses that we possess can never perceive the Atman, since Atman is always one step ahead of the senses. Atman is immobile, always at standstill, and yet it would have overtaken the one who runs fast to reach a place. Before that person reaches his destination, Atman would have already reached there. Atman is both mobile and immobile. Now, this is outright absurd. We cannot imagine of something which is its own opposite! A thing and its opposite are two different things. And yet, the Upanishad says that Atman is near to us and very far away from us, at the same time! Atman is inside everything and simultaneously, is outside everything! Strictly speaking, this description appears to be pure fantasy, like passages from Lewis Carol's Alice in wonderland.

What are the Rishis achieving by talking like this? This is an effective way of saying that Atman cannot be perceived in our present mode of perception; yet, it exists; and when we alter our state of consciousness, we will perceive Atman.

Further, Atman and the Divine Power creating and preserving this world are identical. **Because of Atman, Vayu, the World Soul apportions the activities of all.** The way this has been articulated in the mantra, it could appear that Atman and Shakti are two different, but connected entities. Atman exists; and because Atman exists, depending on Atman, or deriving its authority from Atman, Shakti creates and preserves this Phenomenon. The fact however is that there are not two entities – Atman and Vayu. They are the same entity. Their relation is like the snake and its fluid motion; or milk and its white colour; or fire and its burning heat; or word and its meaning. In each of these cases, there seem to be two different things, but both are in fact the same.

Unless Vayu bestows its grace on the person, one will not be able to perceive the Atman, no matter how much one tries. One can pray to Shakti. And Shakti responds to prayers. The whole manifested world is under the suzerainty of Shakti. One may develop a vague mental conception of Atman by rigorous study, but direct perception is a gift of Shakti. The oldest method known in the Upanishads for direct perception of Atman is prayer to Matarishva or Shakti. In the post Buddhist period, when the philosophical school of Advaita Vedanta was developed by Shankara and others, it became popular to rigorously negate everything and thus obtain a direct perception of Atman. In Sri Ramakrishna's life we saw how this panned out. Tota Puri, an adept in the traditional path of '*Neti-neti*', taught Sri Ramakrishna the extremely hard spiritual practice. Even Sri Ramakrishna found it difficult to achieve the goal of this sadhana. But, with unprecedented speed, he obtained the direct perception of Atman. Then Sri Ramakrishna realised that the blessed state of Nirvikalpa Samadhi that he had achieved after so much effort was nothing other than the state, he had achieved long ago during his very 1<sup>st</sup> vision of the Divine Mother Kali! Something that could be so easily

achieved through prayer to Mother had been made into something that none but the select few, under almost impossible conditions, could achieve! In this mantra, we get a hint of this spiritual practice that was rejuvenated by Sri Ramakrishna. We can pray to the Personal God of our choice (Vayu) and obtain a direct perception of Atman. This spiritual practice will be explained in more detail in mantras #15 & 16, later on in this Upanishad.

The Upanishad, in the next two mantras, then goes on to explain what happens to a person who actually perceives the Atman.

- 6. The wise man beholds all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings; for that reason, he does not hate anyone.**
- 7. To the seer, all things have verily become the Self: what delusion, what sorrow, can there be for him who beholds that oneness?**

Three startling benefits accrue to the blessed person who perceives the Atman – no hatred, no delusion, and no sorrow. Other Upanishads add some more incredible benefits such as ‘freedom from rebirth’, ‘complete life-fulfilment’, ‘utter fearlessness’, ‘supreme strength’, etc.

The perception of Atman is the only perception known to mankind that is purely subjective. Every other perception, no matter how subtle, can be conveyed to others by means of words. Then, by the impact that the words make on the listener’s mind, the same perception can be replicated in the listener’s experience. But, regarding Atma-darshana, that is not possible. The one who has experienced the Atman cannot express his experience in words or in signs. But, the purely subjective experience of Atman brings about some unique changes in the person. All the Upanishads have documented these changes. All mystics of all religions have also documented similar changes in themselves as a consequence of Atma-darshana.

Hatred becomes impossible. As a result of directly perceiving Atman, one comes to see that all distinctions between man and man are illusory. A sense of utter solidarity with all existence arises. Imagine a scenario where you will feel hatred on your left hand. How insane would that be! The sense of solidarity in a person is immediate and unassailable. Similar would be the experience of this person with regard to all beings that exist. He will be clearly seeing that all beings are an integral part of himself. How absurd it would be to hate someone! What about a situation wherein the other guy insults or harms this Self-realised person? We get a glimpse of this situation in the death of the great Sufi mystic Mansur-al-Hallaj. Mansur was condemned to die by the clergy for heresy. Mansur had only words of the greatest love for those who had thus passed his death sentence. One by one, his limbs were cut-off. With each dismemberment, only words of love for God and his fellow-beings came out of his mouth. He had a peaceful demeanour throughout his ordeal till he breathed his last. This ordeal has been recorded in great detail in many Arabic books.

Delusion vanishes. Delusion regarding one’s own true nature vanishes. We ‘know’ that we are this body and the mind. This knowledge is natural to us. When a person perceives Atman, he gets to know that he is not the body or the mind, but the awareness that precedes all beliefs and perceptions. So, consequent to this experience, will he begin to hate his body and mind? After the perception of Atman, the person will



still be able to perceive his body and mind, and entertain a good amount of identification with both. But the dream would have broken down irreparably. It is very difficult to see how much this identification with one's own body and mind colour our decisions and value system. Since that fundamental identification is changed from body-mind to pure awareness, this person's decisions and value system will appear to be unique to us. Swamiji says: *Each thought we think is tinged with our own character, so that for the pure and holy man, even his jests or abuse will have the twist of his own love and purity and do good.*<sup>22</sup>

Sorrow is gone forever. Changes in our life-situations make us sad. We all have our own hopes and fears. Our state of mind is closely dependent on how our life's experiences are aligned with our hopes and fears. The slightest misalignment causes us sorrow. Pain and sorrow are universal experiences. And its presence in our life acts as a great motive force for determining our actions. We instinctively avoid pain and seek joy. The ideal we all aim for is a state where we do not experience sorrow at all, and we experience joy and happiness always. The direct perception of Atman is said to remove all sorrow forever. What about happiness then? Can we really lose our ability to experience sorrow entirely? Do we see that in the lives of the great ones who have perceived Atman? Many such lives are recorded in great detail.

In the life of Swami Vivekananda, we find that there were innumerable instances when he experienced sorrow. Hence, we must be careful in understanding this statement of the Upanishad rightly. Self-realization does not remove the capability of the person to experience pain and sorrow. What then? Some will say that after experiencing sorrow, the Self-realised soul rebounds back quickly to equilibrium. This argument is specious. Everyone in this world rebounds back from loss and sorrow; some sooner and some later, but all do. Regaining one's composure and equilibrium does not necessarily depend on Self-realization. Don't we see innumerable people making incredible comebacks from unimaginable losses in life? Surely not all of them have directly perceived Atman! What then?

This statement has to be understood as referring mainly to the particular experience of direct perception of Atman. It is only in that state that one can experience absolute cessation of sorrow of all sorts. A person who has had that supremely blessed experience and has again regained normal consciousness of an embodied person, will surely experience joy and sorrow. But his experience will be qualitatively different from ours. If anything, the Self-realised soul's experience of both joy and sorrow are keener than ours. Swamiji says poignantly: *Think of the intense enjoyment that the pig has! No man has that. Where is it gone? Man has changed it into intellectual enjoyment. The pig cannot enjoy religious lectures. That is one step higher and keener yet than intellectual pleasures, and that is the spiritual plane, spiritual enjoyment of things divine, soaring beyond reason and intellect. To procure that we shall have to **lose all these sense-enjoyments**. This is the highest utility.*<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the experience of a realised soul, Swamiji says: *Herein lies the whole secret of Existence. Waves may roll over the surface and tempest rage, but deep down*

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<sup>22</sup> Complete Works: Vol-7: *Inspired Talks*: Entry on Wednesday, June 26, 1895

<sup>23</sup> Complete Works: Vol-4: *Lectures & Discourses: The Claims of Religion*

*there is the stratum of infinite calmness, infinite peace, and infinite bliss.*<sup>24</sup> It appears to be an experience of extreme tension; on the one hand is a keen sense of loss, and simultaneously on the other hand is the unmistakable experience of the Whole. It is like the Pacific Ocean; on one shore there is a terrible storm raging, wreaking havoc; at the very same time, on another shore, there is beautiful calm breeze; all at once. If we ask, if the Pacific Ocean is turbulent, we must say that it is both turbulent and calm simultaneously. While the experience of sorrow is common to both the ordinary person and the Self-realised soul, it is the Self-realised soul alone who can claim to have experienced a state of complete cessation of sorrow. For the rest of us, the experience of the most intense joy also is mixed with a tinge of sorrow, a haunting awareness that the experience will go away soon. The Self-realised soul is marked by the absence of this feeling.

**8. It is He who pervades all – He who is bright and bodiless, without scar or sinews, pure and by evil unpierced; who is the Seer, omniscient, transcendent and uncreated. He has duly allotted to the eternal World-Creators their respective duties.**

An incredible description of Atman is given in this mantra.

Atman, the real Self of man, **pervades everything**. That is why Atman answers to the description given in mantras #4 & #5. Atman is **bright** with the light of undiminishing awareness. I have a body, and my innermost core is pure awareness. Yet, when I perceive the Atman by stilling my prana, I have the clearest and undeniable experience of being bodiless, sings the Upanishad Rishi. The undifferentiated nature of Atman is hinted at by the words **without scar or sinew, pure and untouched by evil**. Atman is the **eternal witness**, the eternal seer. Atman is **all-knowing, transcendent** to body, senses, mind and Prana. Atman is **uncreated**. Up to this description, we can sort of make sense of what the Upanishad Rishi says. The next statement of the Rishi introduces a major chasm in our understanding. **Atman has duly allotted to the eternal World-Creators, their respective duties**. It is possible to imagine oneself as all of the preceding qualities, but how does one imagine to have allotted duties to all the World-Creators? Wouldn't that be stretching our imagination a bit too far?

The idea conveyed by the mantra is – it is actually impossible to imagine the Atman in our present state of consciousness. We saw this limitation before in mantras #4 & #5. Upanishad Rishis declare that every person has the ability within oneself to raise one's state of consciousness beyond the commonly acknowledged states, which are – waking, dreaming and deep sleep. The Rishis boldly claim that they have achieved an uncommon state of consciousness called 'Samadhi'.

Perception depends on our state of consciousness.

If we are awake, as we all are, we perceive the myriad things of this world; we see everything is different from everything else; and yet, there is an interconnectedness between things here. In this state of consciousness, we are capable of using our senses and our mind. A most wonderful world is perceived through this complex mechanism.

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<sup>24</sup> Complete Works: Vol-4: Writings: Prose: *A Message of sympathy to a Friend* (Written from Bombay on 23rd May, 1893 to D. R. Balaji Rao who just had a severe domestic affliction.)

If we are dreaming, as we all do, twice in a 24-hour cycle, we perceive a very vivid and colourful world, of our own creation. This perception is highly personalised. While the perceptions in the waking state are shared by everyone, perceptions in dream state are highly individualistic.

The perception in deep sleep is of blankness.

In our present state of existence, all perceptions are experiences (called *Bhoga* in Sanskrit). Experience or *Bhoga* requires the joint functioning of awareness, senses, the mind, and Prana. Perception need not necessarily be experience. Perception can also be pure witnessing. For perception to be pure witnessing, Prana has to be calmed down from its present state of high vibration form. Senses have to be controlled and made calm; then activities of mind have to be controlled and made calm. Then Prana becomes calm. Once Prana becomes calm, a tremendous transformation in personality occurs. An incredible expansion in one's sense of identity occurs. While one felt that one was localised to a single body and mind, now, one starts feeling oneself identified with all that exists. This is not a thought or a feeling. This is a direct perception. This state of consciousness is distinct just like waking, dreaming and deep sleep are distinct states of consciousness that one experiences day-in and day-out. This state of consciousness is called Samadhi. It is in this state of consciousness that one clearly feels that **(oneself) has duly allotted to the eternal World-Creators, their respective duties**. Until one's consciousness has transformed to this blessed state, this particular statement of the Upanishad does not make sense.

The greatest benefit or utility of the Upanishad lies right here. It repeatedly speaks of this unique state of consciousness, which is a possibility for every human being, irrespective of culture, race, religion or ethnicity. This gives eternal hope for man. No matter what a person's present state of existence is, - whether he is pure or impure, whether he is a saint or a criminal, whether he is rich or poor, whether he is young or old, whether one is a man or a woman, - everyone has this possibility to achieve this incredible state of consciousness. Again, these are not thoughts or feelings, nor are they figures of speech. This is a matter of perception. Swamiji used to repeatedly point out: *Religion is not in doctrines, in dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming, it is realisation. We hear so many talking about God and the soul, and all the mysteries of the universe, but if you take them one by one, and ask them, 'Have you realised God? Have you seen your Soul?' – how many can say they have?*<sup>25</sup> ...Give up all argumentation and other distractions. Is there anything in dry intellectual jargon? It only throws the mind off its balance and disturbs it. Things of subtler planes have to be realised. Will talking do that? So, give up all vain talk... Who is a true witness? He is a true witness to whom the thing said is a direct perception. Therefore, the Vedas are true, because they consist of the evidence of competent persons. But is this power of perception peculiar to any? No! The Rishi, the Aryan, and the Mlechchha all alike have it.<sup>26</sup>

9. **Into a blind darkness they enter who are devoted to Avidya; but into a greater darkness they enter who engage in Vidya alone.**
10. **One thing, they say, is obtained from Vidya; another, they say, from Avidya. Thus, we have heard from the wise who have taught us this.**

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<sup>25</sup> Complete Works: Vol-2: *Bhakti or Devotion*

<sup>26</sup> Complete Works: Vol-1: Raja Yoga: Ch-VI: *Pratyahara & Dharana*

**11. He who is aware that both *Vidya* and *Avidya* should be pursued together, overcomes death through *Avidya* and obtains immortality through *Vidya*.**

These three mantras use two technical terms – *Vidya* and *Avidya*. Today, these two words mean ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Ignorance’ respectively. But, during the days of the Isha Upanishad, these two words meant something totally different. Most modern translations of these mantras translate these two terms as knowledge and ignorance. With this translation, these mantras make no sense. Acharya Shankara too interprets these two terms in a strange manner; he says *Vidya* means ‘meditation on a Deity’; *Avidya* means rituals. So, the purport of these mantras, according to Shankara is – one has to meditate on a Deity along with performing rituals; if a person sticks to only one and ignores the other, great danger awaits him in future.

Swami Vivekananda avers that we need not torture the text in this manner at all.

We have in the Mundaka Upanishad a beautiful conception; all knowledge that man has access to, can be categorised into two – *Para-Vidya* and *Apara-Vidya*; *Para-Vidya* is that knowledge by which a man gets to know his own true nature; *Apara-Vidya* includes all knowledge of this world, except of one’s own true nature. These mantras in the Isha Upanishad can be understood to refer to the same categorisation that later on came to be denoted by *Para-Vidya* and *Apara-Vidya*.

In general, we see a dichotomy between religion and science. Religion reveals unique facts about Man, God and the World. Science reveals unique facts about the World. Science does not talk about Man and God. Ideas about the World emanating from science clash with ideas about the World emanating from religion. Thus, modern people have to be loyal either to religion or to science. It has become almost impossible to harmonise religion with science. Religious leaders all over the world are attempting to resolve this issue by directing their followers to believe in their dictates about Man and God and are giving their followers the concession to believe in science regarding matters concerning the World. But this is tricky. Many aspects of Man are impacted by the discoveries of science. If you study the Papal encyclicals and directives in the last 100 years, you will find most of them struggling to harmonise core Christian practices with modern scientific discoveries concerning the World and their impact on the life of Man in society. Abortion is one such contentious issue. Contraception is another. Many more such issues are there.

These three mantras, and the next three mantras of Isha Upanishad resolve this matter for us in one go. The Rishi of Isha Upanishad declares that the goal of the two studies – the study of one’s own nature, and the study of the world around us – are very different. If we study this world in the greatest depth humanly possible, will we stumble upon the knowledge of our own true self? No. Similarly, if we have directly perceived the Atman, as a consequence, will we know Maxwell’s equations of electromagnetism, for instance, or how the tides work?<sup>27</sup> No. We may imagine them as two infinite worlds, the inner and the outer. We may pursue our enquiry into either one of them and obtain tremendous depth of knowledge. But, no amount of depth in one world will reveal to us knowledge of the other world. Each has to be pursued separately. In fact, the Shanti

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: Entry on Sunday, September 7, 1884: They waited in the Panchavati to see the bore of the tide. MASTER (to the devotees): “The ebb-tide and flood-tide are indeed amazing...(To M.) “What is the explanation of the ebb-tide and flood-tide?”

mantra with which this Upanishad begins expresses this idea very beautifully: *Om. That is full; this is full. This fullness has been projected from that fullness. When this fullness merges in that fullness, all that remains is fullness. Om. Peace! Peace! Peace!* The inner world is infinite; the external world also is infinite; we have discovered that the external world is projected from the inner world; through the practice of Yoga, it is possible to merge the external world into the inner world; when that merger happens, what remains is one infinite existence, without distinction.

If we ask, which of these two is important? Upanishad says that each is important in its own place. Each is necessary for the full development of man. If we believe that the study of the world around us is more important, we would have missed the mark. How? The study of the world gives us unimaginable benefits; life becomes comfortable; life becomes joyous. Yet, this study alone will be unfulfilling because we would have known a huge lot about the world, but we would be ignorant about our own true nature. For a long time, man remains busy with his desires and aspirations. For that period, he may not bother about what lies within him. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that as long as the child is busy with its toys, it is not bothered about its mother; but a time comes when the best toys do not retain the attention of the child and it starts wailing for its mother. The Rishi of the Mundaka Upanishad expresses the same idea beautifully as follows: *Let a brahmin, after having examined all these worlds that are gained by works, acquire freedom from desires: nothing that is eternal can be produced by what is not eternal. In order that he may understand that Eternal, let him, fuel in hand, approach a guru who is well versed in the Vedas and always devoted to Brahman.*<sup>28</sup>

Take the other scenario. A man has understood that nothing of this world can ever permanently satisfy him. He renounces this world and dives deep into himself and perceives Atman directly. The Rishi says that this man too has missed the mark! How is that? Hasn't he obtained the Eternal? Shouldn't that keep him satisfied? How can the Rishi say that this person enters into greater darkness? This is a little difficult to understand, given our value system which places greater importance on the inner life of man.

To understand this enigmatic statement of the Isha Upanishad Rishi, we need Sri Ramakrishna's words, which we will quote in-extenso: *The jnani 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 Vijnani, 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 intuitively 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 Vijnani sees that the Reality which is nirguna, without attributes, is also saguna, with attributes. A man cannot live on the roof a long time. He comes down again. Those who realize Brahman in samadhi come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings. In the musical scale there are the notes sa, re ga, ma, pa, dha, and ni; but one cannot keep one's voice on 'ni' a long time. The ego does not vanish altogether. The man coming down from samadhi perceives that it is Brahman that has become the ego, the universe, and all living beings. This is known as Vijnana...*<sup>29</sup> *What is Vijnana? It is knowing God in a*

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<sup>28</sup> Mundaka Upanishad: I-2-xii

<sup>29</sup> The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Entry on August 5, 1882

*special way. The awareness and conviction that fire exists in wood is jnana, knowledge. But to cook rice on that fire, eat the rice, and get nourishment from it is Vijnana. To know by one's inner experience that God exists is jnana. But to talk to Him, to enjoy Him as Child, as Friend, as Master, as Beloved, is Vijnana. The realization that God alone has become the universe and all living beings is Vijnana...<sup>30</sup> Jnana is the realization of Self through the process of 'Neti, neti', 'Not this, not this'. One goes into samadhi through this process of elimination and realizes the Atman. But Vijnana means Knowledge with a greater fullness. Some have heard of milk, some have seen milk, and some have drunk milk. He who has merely heard of it is 'ignorant'. He who has seen it is a jnani. But he who has drunk it has Vijnana, that is to say, a fuller knowledge of it. After having the vision of God, one talks to Him as if He were an intimate relative. That is Vijnana...<sup>31</sup> First of all, you must discriminate, following the method of 'Neti, neti': 'He is not the five elements, nor the sense-organs, nor the mind, nor the intelligence, nor the ego. He is beyond all these cosmic principles.' You want to climb to the roof; then you must eliminate and leave behind all the steps one by one. The steps are by no means the roof. But after reaching the roof you find that the steps are made of the same materials brick, lime, and brick-dust as the roof. It is the Supreme Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings and the twenty-four cosmic principles. That which is Atman has become the five elements. You may ask why the earth is so hard, if it has come out of Atman? All is possible through the will of God. Don't you see that bone and flesh are made from blood and semen? How hard 'sea-foam' becomes! After attaining Vijnana one can live in the world as well. Then one clearly realizes that God Himself has become the universe and all living beings, that He is not outside the world. The fact is that one must have the 'spiritual eye'. You will develop that eye as soon as your mind becomes pure. Take for instance the Kumari Puja. I worshipped a virgin. The girl, to be sure, had all her human imperfections; still I regarded her as the Divine Mother Herself. On one side is the wife and on the other the son. Love is bestowed on both, but in different ways. Therefore, it comes to this, that everything depends upon the mind. The pure mind acquires a new attitude. Through that mind one sees God in this world. Therefore, one needs spiritual discipline.<sup>32</sup>*

This concept of Vijnana, enunciated by Sri Ramakrishna is the right explanation of these three mantras of the Isha Upanishad.

If we look at the history of the Hindu religion, we will understand why this important idea got lost in India. The Upanishads were composed a few thousand years before Buddha. When Buddha tried to learn Brahmavidya, there was no one willing to teach him. We have, however, had an unbroken lineage of Brahmavidya experts right from the Upanishad period till now. So, why couldn't Buddha get a Guru? The knowledge was deeply entrenched in a hierarchical caste system. Buddha, being a Kshatriya, was not allowed entry into the closed Brahmin-caste, and hence he couldn't learn from the extant traditions of Upanishads. So, Buddha discovered Brahmavidya afresh, from first principles, without the help of tradition. The advantage of this re-discovery was that Brahmavidya, in its bare-bones form, was made available to the masses, bypassing the hierarchical caste system. But tradition always has some vital advantages which amateurs miss. Tradition allows for infinite nuances within itself. Innumerable minor details get accumulated through tradition and gets passed on to

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<sup>30</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: Entry on Friday, September 7, 1883

<sup>31</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: Entry on Saturday, April 5, 1884

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*

future generations, which a re-discovery can never achieve. Buddha brought Brahavidya out of the clutches of Brahmin caste, but over time, it got entrenched in the monastic circles! Post-Buddhist belief was that anything really spiritual required that man must become a monk; real spirituality was not possible within the married circumstance. Further, real spirituality is possible only by following the path of reason and meditation; this was another belief that entrenched itself in the Hindu mind after Buddha. Notice that both these post-Buddhist developments are closely related to one another; they supplement and complement one another.

What is the problem with these two developments within Hinduism? It leads to the exclusion of the masses from hard-core religion, especially the spiritual benefits of religion. Only the social and economic aspects of religion remained for the masses. That is not enough for elevating the soul. This is one of the worst forms of oppression.

With the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, this national aberration has been corrected.

In the statements of Sri Ramakrishna quoted above, we bring the reader's notice to an important point. Sri Ramakrishna says "*The fact is that one must have the 'spiritual eye'. You will develop that eye as soon as your mind becomes pure.*" No matter how deep you delve into this world, becoming an expert in as many fields of knowledge as you wish, you will never develop this 'spiritual eye'. The development of this 'spiritual eye' happens only by delving deep into one's own inner world, the forte of religion. It is unfortunate that these two worlds are so utterly separated from one another. How nice it would have been if development in one would have led to commensurate development in the other. But that is not the case. Why? We do not know why. But we do know that such is not the case, and hence the wise thing to do would be to develop both simultaneously. Most of us spend our whole lifetime engaged with this external world, without developing anything within us. The maximum that most of us do is develop the powers of the mind such as reasoning, memory, sensory acuity, linguistic abilities, organising abilities, manipulative abilities, and such things. All these are really fine and grand. They are not trivial things. Look at the world today. How many things have been discovered and invented and life has been made so much easier and better as a result! Yet, if we were to be told that this is all that there is to our life, we would all be extremely dissatisfied. Something more is needed. There is a deep rooted need that arises deep inside the heart of man, especially when he has experienced a huge amount of this world. How does one satisfy that need?

Apart from all the innumerable powers and abilities of our mind that we can develop by using this external world, there is a very rare set of abilities within every living person. This mind can be made extremely alert and self-aware; it can be made extremely calm and silent. It is impossible to achieve access to these two abilities of our mind by dealing with the external mind. The closest we get is the 'Flow State' which has been studied extensively by noted Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. But even if we immerse ourselves in Flow States for extended periods of time, it will never automatically awaken these two abilities of our mind – extreme awareness and extreme calmness. Of course, flow states are associated with heightened awareness, but that has to do with sensory awareness and not with an introspective, reversed focus on one's own self. The mind gazing into itself is one of

the grandest states that a man can experience. And this state does not happen automatically. It has to be consciously cultivated. This area is monopolised by religion.

These two closely connected abilities of our mind are clubbed under one term by religion – Purity. Hence Sri Ramakrishna says, “*You will develop that (spiritual) eye as soon as your mind becomes pure.*”

In the life of Swami Vivekananda, we come across a most strange conversation between the young Naren and his Guru Sri Ramakrishna. One day Naren came to his Guru and expressed his desire to remain immersed in Nirvikalpa Samadhi, coming to normal consciousness once in a couple of days to eat a little so that the body would survive. This is the greatest and purest prayer any spiritual disciple can make to his Guru. While Sri Ramakrishna should have danced in joy to have gotten such a rare disciple, he started berating the young man, saying that he had believed that Naren was a large-hearted man, who would be of great utility to his fellow-beings, while he turned out to be a small-minded commoner! This berating from his Guru made Naren so ashamed that never again did he entertain such a desire. Swami Nikhilananda records this incident as follows: *Sri Ramakrishna said to Naren: ‘Shame on you! You are asking for such an insignificant thing. I thought that you would be like a big banyan tree, and that thousands of people would rest in your shade. But now I see that you are seeking your own liberation.’ Thus scolded, Narendra shed profuse tears. He realized the greatness of Sri Ramakrishna’s heart.*<sup>33</sup> This scolding fructified later on in Naren’s life in an incredible manner. As Swami Vivekananda, he was found to say the following: *Let each one work out one’s own salvation. Freedom in all matters, i.e., advance towards Mukti is the worthiest gain of man. To advance oneself towards freedom – physical, mental, and spiritual – and help others to do so, is the supreme prize of man... Another truth I have realised is that altruistic service only is religion, the rest, such as ceremonial observances, are madness – even it is wrong to hanker after one’s own salvation. Liberation is only for him who gives up everything for others, whereas others who tax their brains day and night harping on ‘my salvation’, ‘my salvation’, wander about with their true well-being ruined, both present and prospective; and this I have seen many a time with my own eyes.*<sup>34</sup> He formulated the motto of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission as ‘*Atmano mokshartham jagadhitaya cha*’; which means ‘these two organisations have been formed for the sake of achieving one’s own salvation and for the benefit of the whole world’.

These three mantras talk about the individual person and his endeavours. An individual can engage himself in knowing this manifest world. An individual can engage himself in knowing his own self. These two fields of a man’s attention are distinctly different and separate. The external world does not reveal anything about our inner self. Similarly, our own inner self does not reveal anything about the external world. Every man must pursue both these fields for life-fulfilment.

The next three mantras are very similar to these three mantras, but they talk about the cosmic reality.

## **12. Into a blind darkness they enter who worship only the unmanifested prakriti; but into a greater darkness they enter who worship the manifested Hiranyagarbha.**

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<sup>33</sup> *A biography of Swami Vivekananda*: by Swami Nikhilananda: Pg-33

<sup>34</sup> Complete Works: Vol-5: *Epistles – 1<sup>st</sup> Series*: LXXXIX: 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1899 to Mrinalini Bose



13. **One thing, they say, is obtained from the worship of the manifested; another, they say, from the worship of the unmanifested. Thus, we have heard from the wise who taught us this.**
14. **He who knows that both the unmanifested prakriti and the manifested Hiranyagarbha should be worshipped together, overcomes death by the worship of Hiranyagarbha and obtains immortality through devotion to prakriti.**

When we consider the individual, we can clearly distinguish between the inner world of man and a world that is external to him. When we consider the world as a whole, we can similarly distinguish between two entities – Brahman and Shakti.

Hindus have spent a lot of time and energy in search of God. This search has been incredibly elaborate and has been wonderfully documented. One of the reasons for this search for God was to explain the existence of this world. In their journey for God, they found out that having only one generic term ‘God’ was not sufficient to denote the entity behind this phenomenon. They came up with a hierarchy of terms to denote a series of personality-transformations that ‘God’ undergoes for manifesting this world that we now have. Thus, we have terms like *Hiranyagarbha*, *Sutratman*, *Paramatman*, *Avyakrita*, *Avyakta*, *Virat*, *Taijasa*, *Praajna*, *Saguna*, *Nirguna*, *Parabrahman*, *Shakti*, *Parashakti*, *Sambhuti*, *Vinasha*, *Asambhuti*, *Prakriti*, *Purusha*, *Tat*, *Saha*, *Rayi*, etc. The details are mindboggling. During the period of Isha Upanishad, the evolution of these terms was perhaps not so elaborate. Nevertheless, they had some of these terms used in these three mantras, as we can see. The idea is something like this: The world we live in, has two distinct aspects – matter and energy on the one hand, with life and consciousness on the other. The Rishis of the Upanishads were able to resolve everything that exists, back into the primordial categories of Brahman and Shakti. Brahman is consciousness alone. Shakti is everything else – matter, energy and life. The people in this world can be seen devoting their time and energy to the pursuit of either consciousness alone to the exclusion of everything else, or, to the pursuit of everything else to the exclusion of consciousness. Both these pursuits have their own inherent benefits. Notwithstanding the benefits that these two studies showers on its votaries, when pursued exclusively, these three mantras say categorically that one should **pursue both simultaneously**.

Brahman alone does not explain this world. Shakti alone does not explain this world. We need to consider both. In the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, we find Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly state that Brahman and Shakti are identical. In our present state of consciousness, it is impossible to understand that pure consciousness and the dynamic energy running this world are the same. These two appear to be fundamentally different to us. That is the reason we feel the need to pursue their study separately. If we wish to reach pure consciousness, we feel that we have to utterly renounce everything that is manifested. If we wish to get acquainted with Shakti, we feel we have to ignore the higher call of the Atman and engage deeply with this world alone. Both paths lead us astray. *It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the Vijnani, 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 intuitively 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 Vijnani sees that the Reality which is nirguna, without attributes, is also saguna, with attributes. A man cannot live on the roof a long time.*

*He comes down again. Those who realize Brahman in samadhi come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings.*

It is in these six mantras of the Isha Upanishad that we find the basis for the fundamental principles on which the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission are built. Swamiji never tired of enunciating these ideas among his disciples. He says: *In this age, as on the one hand people have to be intensely practical, so on the other hand they have to acquire deep spiritual knowledge.*<sup>35</sup> This statement is but a free-hand translation of these six mantras.

In his Belur Math address, Swamiji says: *It is very good to have a high ideal, but don't make it too high. A high ideal raises mankind, but an impossible ideal lowers them from the very impossibility of the case.*<sup>36</sup> *First, we have to understand that we must not have any impossible ideal. An ideal which is too high makes a nation weak and degraded. This happened after the Buddhist and the Jain reforms. On the other hand, too much practicality is also wrong. If you have not even a little imagination, if you have no ideal let guide you, you are simply a brute. So, we must not lower our ideal, neither are we to lose sight of practicality. We must avoid the two extremes. In our country, the old idea is to sit in a cave and meditate and die. To go ahead of others in salvation is wrong. One must learn sooner or later that one cannot get salvation if one does not try to seek the salvation of his brothers. You must try to combine in your life immense idealism with immense practicality. You must be prepared to go into deep meditation now, and the next moment you must be ready to go and cultivate these fields (Swamiji said, pointing to the meadows of the Math). You must be prepared to explain the difficult intricacies of the Shastras now, and the next moment to go and sell the produce of the fields in the market. You must be prepared for all menial services, not only here, but elsewhere also.*<sup>37</sup> These ideas are the gist of the six mantras of the Isha Upanishad.

Notice how Swamiji brings in the Buddhist reformation when he speaks about the lopsided development in our society. Spirituality cannot be seen as divorced from daily life. It is most harmful to confuse ourselves in this regard. We live a daily life of compromise and guilt, and then isolate ourselves from society and practice spirituality – this is most detrimental to man and society. The beliefs of religion have to be practiced while living with others in society. In order to reorient Hindu society along these Upanishadic lines, Swamiji instituted that the monks too should live in society and not isolate themselves, as has been the tradition in India since Buddha.

Hence Swamiji says: *There is a great opening for the Vedanta to do beneficent work both here and elsewhere. This wonderful idea of the sameness and omnipresence of the Supreme Soul has to be preached for the amelioration and elevation of the human race here as elsewhere. Wherever there is evil and wherever there is ignorance and want of knowledge, I have found out by experience that all evil comes, as our scriptures say, relying upon differences, and that all good comes from faith in equality, in the underlying sameness and oneness of things. This is the great Vedantic ideal. To have the ideal is one thing, and to apply it practically to the details of daily life is quite*

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<sup>35</sup> Complete Works: Vol-6: Conversations & Dialogues: Pt-III: *From the Diary of a Disciple*

<sup>36</sup> From Mr. J. J. Goodwin's October 23, 1896 letter to Mrs. Ole Bull, quoting Swami Vivekananda's conversation at Greycoat Gardens in London (ND 4: 385)

<sup>37</sup> Complete Works: Vol-3: Lectures from Colombo to Almora: *Sannyasa: Its Ideal & Practice*

*another thing. It is very good to point out an ideal, but where is the practical way to reach it?*

*This is teaching on the practical side. Believe, therefore, in yourselves, and if you want material wealth, work it out; it will come to you. If you want to be intellectual, work it out on the intellectual plane, and intellectual giants you shall be. And if you want to attain to freedom, work it out on the spiritual plane, and free you shall be and shall enter into Nirvana, the Eternal Bliss. But one defect which lay in the Advaita was its being worked out so long on the spiritual plane only, and nowhere else; now the time has come when you have to make it practical. It shall no more be a Rahasya, a secret, it shall no more live with monks in caves and forests, and in the Himalayas; it must come down to the daily, everyday life of the people; it shall be worked out in the palace of the king, in the cave of the recluse; it shall be worked out in the cottage of the poor, by the beggar in the street, everywhere; anywhere it can be worked out. Therefore, do not fear whether you are a woman or a Shudra, for this religion is so great, says Lord Krishna, that even a little of it brings a great amount of good. Therefore, children of the Aryans, do not sit idle; awake, arise, and stop not till the goal is reached. The time has come when this Advaita is to be worked out practically. Let us bring it down from heaven unto the earth; this is the present dispensation. Ay, the voices of our forefathers of old are telling us to bring it down from heaven to the earth. Let your teachings permeate the world, till they have entered into every pore of society, till they have become the common property of everybody, till they have become part and parcel of our lives, till they have entered into our veins and tingle with every drop of blood there.<sup>38</sup>*

We specially draw the attention of the reader to the following words of Swamiji quoted above: *Believe, therefore, in yourselves, and if you want material wealth, work it out; it will come to you. If you want to be intellectual, work it out on the intellectual plane, and intellectual giants you shall be. And if you want to attain to freedom, work it out on the spiritual plane, and free you shall be and shall enter into Nirvana, the Eternal Bliss. **But one defect which lay in the Advaita was its being worked out so long on the spiritual plane only, and nowhere else;** now the time has come when you have to make it practical. It shall no more be a Rahasya, a secret, it shall no more live with monks in caves and forests, and in the Himalayas; it must come down to the daily, everyday life of the people; it shall be worked out in the palace of the king, in the cave of the recluse; it shall be worked out in the cottage of the poor, by the beggar in the street, everywhere; anywhere it can be worked out.* The defect with Vedanta has been that it was restricted only to the spiritual plane. India reaped the benefits of doing so. Religion was protected, despite untold assaults on it. Despite everything that happened to India, the civilisation survived, only because Vedanta was restricted to the spiritual plane and the land kept on producing saints, generation after generation. But, is that the only function of Vedanta? No. Vedanta can be made to operate on any plane we like. *If you want material wealth, work it out; it will come to you. If you want to be intellectual, work it out on the intellectual plane, and intellectual giants you shall be. And if you want to attain to freedom, work it out on the spiritual plane, and free you shall be and shall enter into Nirvana, the Eternal Bliss. Vedanta must come down to the daily, everyday life of the people.*

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<sup>38</sup> Complete Works: Vol-3: Lectures from Colombo to Almora: *The Mission of the Vedanta*

When Swamiji proclaimed these ideas, they seemed to be blasphemous, outlandish, and fancy ideas to Indians. His own brother disciples had some trouble making sense of these ideas of Swamiji. And since he proclaimed them after his visit to the West, many thought these ideas were the result of his exposure to the foreign lands. But, these six mantras of the Isha Upanishad show clearly that these ideas of Swamiji are actually there in our own spiritual literature. We had forgotten them. And now, we can revive those ideas again. Hence Swamiji exhorted to Indians, repeatedly: *Go back to your Upanishads. There you will find ideas to rejuvenate the whole land.*<sup>39</sup>

And what is the way to practicalize these ideas?

Sister Nivedita says: *It is a grand gospel – this doctrine of fearlessness, of courage, of self-conquest. Arise, thou Great Divinity that liest hidden within us! In Thy name, all things are possible to us! Making victory and defeat the same, plunge we into battle! But how are we to fight? Most of us, by work. The world’s work is the great Sadhana, wherein we accumulate character, by which, when the time comes, we can rise even into the Nirvikalpa Samadhi itself. Character is self-restraint. Self-restraint is self-direction. Self-direction is concentration. Concentration when perfect is Samadhi. From perfect work to perfect Mukti. This is the swing of the soul. Let us then be perfect in work.*<sup>40</sup> We must imbibe the love of hard work in our younger generation. Sincere, moral, hard work lies at the root of everything grand in life. The honest, sincere, hard-working student of today will become the saint of the future, even while living and working in society, contributing to the national economy, and not necessarily by isolating himself from society as a recluse.

Today, spirituality is associated with visions and ecstasies. The Upanishadic conception of spirituality is something very grand. Character formation is much more valuable than all the divine visions and the most intense ecstasies taken together. True spirituality has nothing to do with marriage or monasticism. True spirituality has nothing to do with outlandish practices. It is today a matter of prestige in the religious world. If we have a person who claims to have visions of gods and goddesses, millions will believe him and revere him as a saint. At the same time, if we have another person, who doesn’t claim to have visions of gods and goddesses, but is a sincere, heart-whole person, deeply sympathetic to fellow human beings, supremely collected, and constantly in a prayerful attitude, we don’t give him the same respect and adoration as we do to the former. This state of affairs will change very soon, due to the impetus given by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The crux of character-formation is selflessness. Swamiji said, *“Unselfishness is God”*. The inscrutable identification we now have with this individuality can be broken down and the real vision enshrined in our consciousness only by being utterly unselfish. The beginning of this amazing process is by being true to our duty. Special, esoteric, secret bizarre spiritual practices are not necessary. Any work that is our duty will suffice. Any karma (or activity) will suffice. **This very karma (or activity) will become Karma-Yoga by means of Prayer.**

Swami Brahmananda used to say: *Pray, pray, pray – pray to God. Work intensely and repeat the name of the Lord unceasingly. Pray to God in the midst of all*

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<sup>39</sup> Complete Works: Vol-3: Lectures from Colombo to Almora: *My Plan of Campaign*

<sup>40</sup> Complete Works of Sister Nivedita: Vol-3: *Religion & Dharma: Work*: Pg-462

work. Do this and see; all your suffering will come to an end. <sup>41</sup> Notice how Swami Brahmananda says, “Work intensely and repeat the name of the Lord unceasingly. Pray to God in the midst of all work.” Not work alone, nor prayer alone; **work and prayer** will go hand-in-hand. Then it becomes a powerful transformative tool.

Hence the next two mantras are about Prayer.

- 15. The door of the Truth is covered by a golden disc. Open it, O Nourisher! Remove it so that I who have been worshipping the Truth may behold It.**
- 16. Nourisher, lone Traveller of the sky! Controller! O Sun, Offspring of Prajapati! Gather Your rays; withdraw Your light. I would see, through Your grace, that form of Yours which is the fairest. I am indeed He, that Purusha, who dwells there.**

Here are two very beautiful prayers that the Isha Upanishad Rishi teaches us. The Rishi told us about the Spiritual Ideal. Then he told us what results to expect when the Ideal is realised in life. Now, the Rishi tells us about the way to realise that Ideal in our life. The way is Prayer.

In a letter written from USA on the 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1894 to Alasinga, Swamiji writes: *The life of Shri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion. He was the object-lesson of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Shastras (scriptures). He showed by his life what the Rishis and Avatars really wanted to teach. The books were theories; he was the realisation. This man had in fifty-one years lived the five thousand years of national spiritual life and so raised himself to be an object-lesson for future generations.*<sup>42</sup> This is an incredible analysis of the life of Sri Ramakrishna. The oldest of Upanishads is considered to be the Isha Upanishad. And the spiritual practice enunciated by this oldest of Upanishads is Prayer. This Upanishad doesn't mention about *Yoga, Vidya, Vichara, Japa, Dhyana, Puja, Bhajana, Parayana*, etc. The original spiritual practice of the Hindus, from which all other spiritual practices have evolved, is Prayer.

In Sri Ramakrishna's life, we see this simple fact manifested clearly. The young Ramakrishna got a job as a priest in the newly built Kali Temple at Dakshineswar. He took his job very seriously. He very soon started questioning the object of his daily worship. To whom do I offer worship daily? This enquiry took a very intense form and he started praying intensely to that presence to whom he was supposedly making offerings daily. This prayer became so intense that he one day had a most glorious spiritual vision of the Being to whom he was worshipping. Purely by prayer, he was able to perceive the Being to whom he offered daily worship. So, Sri Ramakrishna's life was a microcosmic map of the entire religious history of Hinduism, covering the whole gamut of spiritual practices and spiritual experiences recorded in it.

Let me quote *in-extenso* from Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play<sup>43</sup>: *As the days went by, the Master's love and longing continued to increase. Because of his uninterrupted current of thought towards the Divine Mother, some external signs manifested in his body. His appetite and need for sleep diminished. As blood flowed*

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<sup>41</sup> Dharmaprasange Swami Brahmananda: Pg. 143

<sup>42</sup> Complete Works Vol-5: Epistles – 1<sup>st</sup> Series: 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1894 to Alasinga Perumal

<sup>43</sup> Sri Ramakrishna and his Divine Play: Swami Saradananda: Tr by Swami Chetanananda: Pp:432-433

*continually to his chest and head, his chest turned crimson and his eyes were often drenched with tears. He was filled with a constant and intense desire to see the Divine Mother, and repeatedly asked himself: "What shall I do? How can I see Her?" Signs of anxiety and restlessness were therefore always visible in his body except when he meditated and performed worship.*

*We heard from the Master that one day at that time he was singing to the Divine Mother and praying and crying bitterly. He implored piteously: "Mother, I have been praying to You so long! Why don't You listen to me? You showed Yourself to Ramprasad. Why won't You show Yourself to me?"*

*The Master described what happened then: "There was an unbearable pain in my heart because I could not have a vision of Mother. Just as a man wrings out a towel with all his strength to get the water out of it, so I felt as if my heart were being wrung out. I began to think I should never see Mother. I was dying of despair. In my agony, I asked myself: 'What's the use of living this life?' Suddenly my eyes fell on the sword that hangs in the Mother's shrine. I decided to end my life then and there. Like a madman, I ran to the sword and seized it. Then I had a marvellous vision of the Mother and fell down unconscious. Afterwards what happened in the external world, or how that day and the next passed, I don't know. But within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss that I had never before experienced, and I felt the immediate presence of the Divine Mother."*

*On another occasion, the Master narrated to us in detail the same wonderful vision: "It was as if the room, doors, temple, and everything else vanished altogether; as if there were nothing anywhere! And what I saw was an infinite shoreless ocean of light; that ocean was consciousness. However far and in whatever direction I looked, I saw shining waves, one after another, coming towards me to swallow me up. They were madly rushing towards me from all sides, with a terrific noise. Very soon they were upon me, and they pushed me down into unknown depths. I panted and struggled and lost consciousness." Thus, the Master told us that during his first vision he saw a shining ocean of consciousness. But was this pure consciousness the Divine Mother Kali, bestowing boons and fearlessness? Did the Master see Her in that ocean of light? It seems that he did. We heard that when he partially regained his consciousness after the first vision, he uttered plaintively, "Mother, Mother!"*

*When this vision ended, an incessant and violent urge for a constant, uninterrupted vision of the Divine Mother's luminous form arose in the Master's heart. Although this longing did not always manifest itself externally through signs such as weeping, it remained in his heart all the time. Sometimes it would increase to such a point that he could not contain it anymore. Restlessly rolling on the ground with agony, he would pray: "Mother, be gracious unto me. Reveal Yourself to me." He would cry so bitterly that people would gather around him to watch. He was completely unconcerned about what people might say when they saw him in that condition. He later said: "I scarcely realized the presence of people around me. They looked more like shadows or painted pictures than real objects, and so I did not feel any shame or embarrassment at all. Sometimes I would lose outer consciousness from that unbearable agony. Immediately after that I would see the Mother's luminous form bestowing boons and fearlessness! I used to see Her smiling, talking, consoling, or teaching me in various ways."*

Many years later, Sri Ramakrishna got a Guru in the great Vedantic monk Tota Puri, under whose guidance, he attained Nirvikalpa Samadhi. But, this attainment was most strenuous and difficult, even for an aspirant of the calibre of Sri Ramakrishna. The path was so difficult that at one point of time, the extraordinary disciple almost gave up. After attaining Nirvikalpa Samadhi, with superhuman effort, as guided by Tota Puri in the traditionally accepted *Jnana-Marga*, also known as the Via-Negative or the Neti-neti path, Sri Ramakrishna realised that this supreme state of Nirvikalpa Samadhi was the same state that he had achieved years ago purely by prayer! Hence, we find him saying the following to his disciples: “*Let me assure you that a man can realize his Inner Self through sincere prayer.*”<sup>44</sup>

After he had attained perfection in various Sadhanas, Sri Ramakrishna had many unique intuitive perceptions. Some of them were related to himself and others to spirituality in general:

1. He is an incarnation of God.
2. There is no liberation for him.
3. He knew the time of his death.
4. All religions are true: as many faiths, so many paths.
5. Human beings adopt dualism, qualified non-dualism and non-dualism according to their temperaments.
6. **Ordinary people will progress through karma yoga**
7. A religious organization based on this catholic attitude should be founded.

Regarding the 6<sup>th</sup> perception, Swami Saradananda elaborates: The Master indicated the limits of action when he said, “The action of a *sattvic* person drops off automatically. He cannot work even if he tries to; the Lord does not allow him to work. It is just as when a young wife advances in pregnancy. She is given less and less work to do; and when the child is born, she gives up household work altogether and is busied exclusively with the infant. But an ordinary person must try to do his duties with detachment, depending on the Lord, like the maidservant who does everything for her master, knowing in her heart that her home is elsewhere. This is known as karma yoga. As far as possible one should take the name of the Lord and meditate on Him while discharging one’s everyday duties in an unattached way.”<sup>45</sup>

Prayer is thus an integral part of karma yoga, the path for the present age, as revealed by the Divine Mother of the Universe to Sri Ramakrishna. Prayer is therefore an integral part of Sri Ramakrishna’s Mission on earth. Everyone works in this world. What *distinguishes* work from Karma Yoga is prayer.<sup>46</sup>

Coming to the words used in these mantras: Who is this prayer addressed to? **Nourisher** is the common name in both the mantras. The ancient Hindus (in fact, the ancient people of all civilizations) looked upon the Sun as the nourisher of all life on earth. If the Nourisher is meant to be the Sun, then the other words used for addressing in these mantras makes sense: **Lone traveller (in the sky); Controller; son of Prajapati**. How is Sun the controller? It appears as though the entire world’s activity is determined by the movement of the axial earth around the Sun. Moreover, the seasons are also determined by the orbital movement of earth around the Sun. Even during the times of the Isha Upanishad, the Hindus seem to have had some sort of mythology, wherein, the Sun was the offspring of the god Prajapati, which in fact denotes the Lord of Creation.

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<sup>44</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: Entry on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1883: Pg.: 256

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*: Pg.: 362

<sup>46</sup> For a detailed analysis of *Sri Ramakrishna’s advices on prayer*, please refer: [vedatitananda.wordpress.com/2017/07/23/sri-ramakrishna-and-prayer/](http://vedatitananda.wordpress.com/2017/07/23/sri-ramakrishna-and-prayer/)

Mantra #15 prays to the Nourisher, i.e. the Sun, to open the golden disc that covers the Truth, so that I, who am an honest and moral person, may perceive the Truth. Swamiji uttered a very similar statement during a lecture in San Francisco: *The Guru is the bright mask which God wears in order to come to us. As we look steadily on, gradually the mask falls off and God is revealed.*<sup>47</sup> In the light of Swamiji's words, we might have to understand that *Pushan* refers to the Guru and not necessarily to the Sun. Referring to the great individual – the divine incarnation, the Guru, and the Rishi Swamiji used to say to Sister Nivedita: “*You do not yet understand India! We Indians are man-worshippers, after all! Our God is man!*”<sup>48</sup> Hindus have always been a poetic people. They have never been literalists. It is the Westerners who are literalists. All the adjectives used in this mantra – **Nourisher, Lone traveller, Sun, son of Prajapati** – are all synonyms for Guru also! Spirituality stands on the *Guru-Shishya parampara*, the ethereal, unbroken lineage of the Preceptor and the Disciple. Prayer can be offered to Guru. And Guru responds to the sincere prayer of the disciple. We have seen this phenomenon in innumerable Guru-Shishya relations all through history, across religions, not just in Hinduism. Swamiji writes in a letter to Pramadas Mitra from Ghazipur on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1890: *Never during his life did he refuse a single prayer of mine; millions of offences, has he forgiven me; such great love even my parents never had for me. There is no poetry, no exaggeration in all this. It is the bare truth and every disciple of his knows it. In times of great danger, great temptation, I wept in extreme agony with the prayer, “O God, do save me,” but no response came from anybody; but this wonderful saint, or Avatara, or anything else he may be, came to know of all my affliction through his powers of insight into human hearts and lifted it off – in spite of my desire to the contrary – after getting me brought to his presence.*<sup>49</sup>

Notice the words in mantra #16: **I am indeed He, that Purusha, who dwells there.** Just look at the psychology involved in this mantra. I am praying to Guru, or the Personal God. I am imploring the object of my prayer to reveal the Truth. And then, I slip in the words ‘**I am indeed He, that Purusha, who dwells there.**’ How can this be?

Swamiji says: *The Bhakta should be ready to stand up and say, ‘I do not want anything from you, Lord, but if you need anything from me I am ready to give.’ Love knew no fear.*<sup>50</sup> Prayer is a powerful transformative tool in the hands of a person whose character is strong. Swamiji points out that Prayer has many stages. In the lower stages of prayer, we ask for trivial things. He says that as long as we are weak, we might need to make such prayers. But, he says, such prayers can never be made to God, but only to saints and the Personal God. *All those senseless ideas of prayer, the low stages of prayer, which are simply giving words to all sorts of silly desire in our minds, perhaps, will have to go. In all sensible religions, they never allow prayers to God; they allow prayers to gods. That is quite natural. The Roman Catholics pray to the saints; that is quite good. But to pray to God is senseless. To ask God to give you a breath of air, to send down a shower of rain, to make fruits grow in your garden, and so on, is quite unnatural. The saints, however, who were little beings like ourselves, may help us. But to pray to the Ruler of the Universe, praying every little need of ours, and from our childhood saying, “O Lord, I have a headache; let it go,” is ridiculous. There have been millions of souls that have died in this world, and they are all here; they have become gods and angels; let them come to your help. But God! It cannot be. Unto Him we must go for higher things. A fool indeed is he who, resting on the banks of the Ganga,*

<sup>47</sup> Complete Works: Vol-8: Lectures & Discourses: *Discipleship*

<sup>48</sup> Complete Works of Sister Nivedita: Vol-1: Pg-144

<sup>49</sup> Complete Works: Vol-6: *Epistles – 2<sup>nd</sup> Series*: XXV dt. 3rd March, 1890

<sup>50</sup> Complete Works: Vol-3: Lectures from Colombo to Almora: *Bhakti*



*digs a little well for water; a fool indeed is he who, living near a mine of diamonds, digs for bits of crystal.*

*And indeed we shall be fools if we go to the Father of all mercy, Father of all love, for trivial earthly things. Unto Him, therefore, we shall go for light, for strength, for love. But so long as there is weakness and a craving for servile dependence in us, there will be these little prayers and ideas of the worship of the Personal God. But those who are highly advanced do not care for such little helps, they have well-nigh forgotten all about this seeking things for themselves, wanting things for themselves. The predominant idea in them is – not I, but thou, my brother. Those are the fit persons to worship the Impersonal God. And what is the worship of the Impersonal God? No slavery there – “O Lord, I am nothing, have mercy on me.” You know the old Persian poem, translated into English: “I came to see my beloved. The doors were closed. I knocked and a voice came from inside. ‘Who art thou?’ ‘I am so-and-so’. The door was not opened. A second time I came and knocked; I was asked the same question, and gave the same answer. The door opened not. I came a third time, and the same question came. I answered, ‘I am thee, my love,’ and the door opened.” Worship of the Impersonal God is through truth. And what is truth? That I am He. When I say that I am not Thou, it is untrue.<sup>51</sup>*

Prayer is actually meant for the strong person. It is a very effective spiritual tool only if the person feels himself pure and strong. Purity and strength both spring from one’s interconnectedness to everything that exists. If I feel I am different from something, I feel impure. I also feel weak. If I am one with everything that exists, I feel pure; I also feel strong.

*When I say I am separate from you it is a lie, a terrible lie. I am one with this universe, born one. It is self-evident to my senses that I am one with the universe. I am one with the air that surrounds me, one with heat, one with light, eternally one with the whole Universal Being, who is called this universe, who is mistaken for the universe, for it is He and nothing else, the eternal subject in the heart who says, “I am,” in every heart – the deathless one, the sleepless one, ever awake, the immortal, whose glory never dies, whose powers never fail. I am one with That.*

*This is all the worship of the Impersonal, and what is the result? **The whole life of man will be changed.** Strength, strength it is that we want so much in this life, for what we call sin and sorrow have all one cause, and that is our weakness. With weakness comes ignorance, and with ignorance comes misery. It will make us strong. Then miseries will be laughed at, then the violence of the vile will be smiled at, and the ferocious tiger will reveal, behind its tiger's nature, my own Self. That will be the result. That soul is strong that has become one with the Lord; none else is strong. In your own Bible, what do you think was the cause of that strength of Jesus of Nazareth, that immense, infinite strength which laughed at traitors, and blessed those that were willing to murder him? It was that, “I and my Father are one”; it was that prayer, “Father, just as I am one with you, so make them all one with me.” That is the worship of the Impersonal God. Be one with the universe, be one with Him.<sup>52</sup>*

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<sup>51</sup> Complete Works: Vol-1: Lectures & Discourses: Reason & Religion

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

So, mantra #16 can be seen as having two parts: the first part is: **Nourisher, lone Traveller of the sky! Controller! O Sun, Offspring of Prajapati! Gather Your rays; withdraw Your light. I would see, through Your grace, that form of Yours which is the fairest.** The second part of the mantra is: **I am indeed He, that Purusha, who dwells there.** The 1<sup>st</sup> part is a prayer, a supplication. The 2<sup>nd</sup> part is the result of the prayer, the transformation that occurs in the one who prays. As Swamiji said above: *The whole life of man will be changed.* That soul is strong that has become one with the Lord; none else is strong.

17. **Now may my breath return to the all-pervading, immortal Prana! May this body be burnt to ashes! Om O mind, remember, remember all that I have done.**
18. **Fire, lead us by the good path for the enjoyment of the fruit of our action. You know, O god, all our deeds. Destroy our sin of deceit. We offer, by words, our salutations to you.**

These two mantras are a prayer for death.

These mantras make the Isha Upanishad a complete manual for life. The Upanishad began by telling us how to live so that we can get the full benefit of life; then the Upanishad explained the goal of life, attainment of Atman; then the Upanishad delineated the method to realise this goal – Prayer. Now, after living a fulfilling life, beneficial to oneself and to society, the man is dying. How to approach death? The Upanishad will guide us through this critical moment.

The Hindu conception of life revolves around Prana, life-energy. Modern man is keenly aware of energy in the world – electromagnetic, motive, thermal, gravitational, atomic, nuclear, etc., thanks to the vigorous and penetrative dissemination of modern science. But, modern man is utterly ignorant of what causes life or what constitutes life. The Hindu conception is that all energy lies on a spectrum; at one end of the spectrum, energy appears dead and lifeless; at the other end of the spectrum, it takes a unique characteristic of intelligence. This form of energy is called Prana. Language is the connecting link between man and energy in all its forms. Mathematics, the language of logic helps us connect with energy in its so-called lifeless forms. Prayer, the language of the heart, helps us connect with energy in its intelligent form. Every aspect of our life, every activity we perform, is a function of Prana. Prana undergoes three distinct transformations in every man in a 24-hour cycle. They are called Waking, Dream, and Deep Sleep. A 4<sup>th</sup> distinct transformation of Prana that every person is capable of experiencing during his life-time is called Samadhi. And the 5<sup>th</sup> distinct transformation that Prana in every person has to compulsorily undergo is called Death.

Everyone has to die. Even a person who has realised the Atman has to die. It seems paradoxical. One of the much-vaunted characteristics of realising Atman is that one becomes immortal. How then can this person die?

If a person has not realised Atman when alive, he will feel that death is dissolution of his personality and hence a loss. If a person has realised Atman while alive, he will not feel that death is a dissolution of his individuality, because he would have already experienced such a dissolution of his human individuality during the state of Samadhi. So, subjectively, this latter's experience of death will be completely

different from that of the former. Look at the following personal memoir of Swami Turiyananda, which explains this state of death in amazing detail.

Swami Turiyananda was in a diabetic coma for a long time, and the sevaks were also waiting for the last moment. Suddenly he opened his eyes and said to Swami Shankarananda, who was sitting by his side, “Amulya, I can't go now.” After that he slowly got up. A few years later in Kashi Sevashrama, he described the feelings he had in his heart about the incident in this way – “*First I started seeing many saints and deities. Then suddenly I saw Prana emerging. Immediately another force within was engaged in trying to hold my soul. There was a tug of war with this energy. Then I see, Prana was ready to go out after winning the battle. At that time, Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda) came and said, 'Hari Bhai, where are you going? Now is not the time.' At that moment the strength of the defeated energy inside increased and it subdued the Prana in one go and placed it in its place inside me. Only then I opened my eyes and told Amulya that I would not leave the body that time.*”<sup>53</sup>

Note how Turiyananda says, “*Immediately another force within was engaged in trying to hold my soul.*” So, there is Prana inside us which animates us – our body, mind, and senses. Then there is another force within, which is akin to Prana, but distinct. This ‘another force’ is called the *Jivatma* or the individual soul. It is the actual locus of experience. Death is the dissociation of Prana from the *Jivatma*.

**Now may my breath return to the all-pervading, immortal Prana!** When the moment of death arrives, this is the prayer that has to be uttered. This prayer proceeds from a worldview of Prana, Jivatma and Atman as described above. The next prayer is: **May this body be burnt to ashes!** Then, a prayer to recollect everything that I have done in my life till this final moment: **Om O mind, remember, remember all that I have done.** We saw how Swami Turiyananda described this phase of death. Studies of Near-Death-Experiences (NDEs) by Dr Raymond Moody and Dr Elizabeth-Kubler Ross have documented innumerable instances of the dying person recalling all the myriad experiences of his own life in a matter of seconds.

The Taittiriya Upanishad has the following revealing mantras in this context: *He who knows this, after dying to this world, attains the self which consists of food, attains the self which consist of the vital breath, attains the self which consists of the mind, attains the self which consists of intellect, attains the self which consists of bliss. He who knows the Bliss of Brahman, whence words together with the mind turn away, unable to reach It – he is not afraid of anything whatsoever.” He does not distress himself with the thought: Why did I not do what is good? Why did I do what is evil? Whosoever knows this regards both these as Atman; indeed, he cherishes both these as Atman.*<sup>54</sup> Here, the Rishis says that when a person who has realised Atman dies, he will not trouble himself with the invariable questions ‘Why did I not do what is good? Why did I do what is evil?’ Even such a person will have a quick review of his life, but he will not ask himself these two questions. These two questions will torment a dying man if he has not realised the Atman while living. Again, recall how Turiyananda saw so many wonderful things right before his NDE.

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<sup>53</sup> Talks with Swami Turiyananda: Pg-239

<sup>54</sup> Taittiriya Upanishad: Part-II: Ch-8 & 9

The last mantra is a prayer to God for taking our soul by the Bright Path to the world which we deserve based on our Karma. This mantra does not actually belong here. Mantra #17 can refer to both to a realised soul as well as an ordinary person. But the mantra #18 can refer only to an ordinary person, who hasn't yet realised the Atman while alive. The reason for including this mantra could be that this Isha Upanishad belongs to the Vajasaneyi Samhita. The Samhita portion of the Vedas deals with rituals meant for the unrealised soul. All other Upanishads belong to the Brahmana portion, appearing at the very end of the Vedas (hence the term Vedanta). Since Isha Upanishad appears bang in the middle of the ritualistic portion, it retains this mantra that refers to the elaborate afterlife conception of the Hindus.

There are innumerable theories of what happens to a person after death. In fact, every religion has its own unique and elaborate eschatology. Most of them have to do with Heavens and Hells. In the beginning, in Hinduism also, they developed elaborate theories of what path the soul takes post-mortem, and what determines the state of existence of the soul post-mortem. Then, the rational thinkers, armed with their immaculate purity of mind, saw through the hypocrisy of all such theories and went on to discover the Atman within, even while alive. This discovery changed everything in Hinduism. Death happens to a realised soul too. But the subjective experience is utterly different from that of an ordinary person. The reader may kindly refer to the deliberation on this topic in our Study of the Katha Upanishad.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Cf: [vedatitananda.wordpress.com/2021/01/21/study-of-katha-upanishad/](http://vedatitananda.wordpress.com/2021/01/21/study-of-katha-upanishad/)