



### **Isa Upanishad** **(with commentary by Swami Paramananda)**

*This Upanishad derives its title from the opening words Isa-vasya, “God-covered.” The use of Isa (Lord)—a more personal name of the Supreme Being than Brahman, Atman or Self, the names usually found in the Upanishads—constitutes one of its peculiarities. It forms the closing chapter of the Yajur-Veda, known as Shukla (White).*

*Oneness of the Soul and God, and the value of both faith and works as means of ultimate attainment are the leading themes of this Upanishad. The general teaching of the Upanishads is that works alone, even the highest, can bring only temporary happiness and must inevitably bind a man unless through them he gains knowledge of his real Self. To help him acquire this knowledge is the aim of this and all Upanishads.*

#### **PEACE CHANT**

OM! That (the Invisible-Absolute) is whole; whole is this (the visible phenomenal); from the Invisible Whole comes forth the visible whole. Though the visible whole has come out from that Invisible Whole, yet the Whole remains unaltered.

OM! PEACE! PEACE! PEACE!

*The indefinite term “That” is used in the Upanishads to designate the Invisible-Absolute, because no word or name can fully define It. A finite object, like a table or a tree, can be defined; but God, who is infinite and unbounded, cannot be expressed by finite language. Therefore the Rishis or Divine Seers, desirous not to limit the Unlimited, chose the indefinite term “That” to designate the Absolute.*

*In the light of true wisdom the phenomenal and the Absolute are inseparable. All existence is in the Absolute; and whatever exists, must exist in It; hence all manifestation is merely a modification of the One Supreme Whole, and neither increases nor diminishes It. The Whole therefore remains unaltered.*

#### **I**

All this, whatsoever exists in the universe, should be covered by the Lord. Having renounced (the unreal), enjoy (the Real). Do not covet the wealth of any man.

*We cover all things with the Lord by perceiving the Divine Presence everywhere. When the consciousness is firmly fixed in God, the conception of diversity naturally drops away; because the One Cosmic Existence shines through all things. As we gain the light of wisdom, we cease to cling to the unrealities of this world and we find all our joy in the realm of Reality.*

*The word “enjoy” is also interpreted by the great commentator Sankaracharya as “protect,” because knowledge of our true Self is the greatest protector and sustainer. If we do not have*

*this knowledge, we cannot be happy; because nothing on this external plane of phenomena is permanent or dependable. He who is rich in the knowledge of the Self does not covet external power or possession.*

## II

If one should desire to live in this world a hundred years, one should live performing Karma (righteous deeds). Thus thou mayest live; there is no other way. By doing this, Karma (the fruits of thy actions) will not defile thee.

*If a man still clings to long life and earthly possessions, and is therefore unable to follow the path of Self-knowledge (Gnana-Nishta) as prescribed in the first Mantram (text), then he may follow the path of right action (Karma-Nishta). Karma here means actions performed without selfish motive, for the sake of the Lord alone. When a man performs actions clinging blindly to his lower desires, then his actions bind him to the plane of ignorance or the plane of birth and death; but when the same actions are performed with surrender to God, they purify and liberate him.*

## III

After leaving their bodies, they who have killed the Self go to the worlds of the Asuras, covered with blinding ignorance.

*The idea of rising to bright regions as a reward for well-doers, and of falling into realms of darkness as a punishment for evil-doers is common to all great religions. But Vedanta claims that this condition of heaven and hell is only temporary; because our actions, being finite, can produce only a finite result.*

*What does it mean "to kill the Self?" How can the immortal Soul ever be destroyed? It cannot be destroyed, it can only be obscured. Those who hold themselves under the sway of ignorance, who serve the flesh and neglect the Atman or the real Self, are not able to perceive the effulgent and indestructible nature of their Soul; hence they fall into the realm where the Soul light does not shine. Here the Upanishad shows that the only hell is absence of knowledge. As long as man is overpowered by the darkness of ignorance, he is the slave of Nature and must accept whatever comes as the fruit of his thoughts and deeds. When he strays into the path of unreality, the Sages declare that he destroys himself; because he who clings to the perishable body and regards it as his true Self must experience death many times.*

## IV

That One, though motionless, is swifter than the mind. The senses can never overtake It, for It ever goes before. Though immovable, It travels faster than those who run. By It the all-pervading air sustains all living beings.

*This verse explains the character of the Atman or Self. A finite object can be taken from one place and put in another; but it can only occupy one space at a time. The Atman, however, is present everywhere; hence, though one may run with the greatest swiftness to overtake It, already It is there before him.*

*Even the all-pervading air must be supported by this Self, since It is infinite; and as nothing can live without breathing air, all living things must draw their life from the Cosmic Self.*

## V

It moves and It moves not. It is far and also It is near. It is within and also It is without all this.

*It is near to those who have the power to understand It, for It dwells in the heart of every one; but It seems far to those whose mind is covered by the clouds of sensuality and self-delusion. It is within, because It is the innermost Soul of all creatures; and It is without as the essence of the whole external universe, infilling it like the all-pervading ether.*

## VI

He who sees all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings, he never turns away from It (the Self).

## VII

He who perceives all beings as the Self for him how can there be delusion or grief, when he sees this oneness (everywhere)?

*He who perceives the Self everywhere never shrinks from anything, because through his higher consciousness he feels united with all life. When a man sees God in all beings and all beings in God, and also God dwelling in his own Soul, how can he hate any living thing? Grief and delusion rest upon a belief in diversity, which leads to competition and all forms of selfishness. With the realization of oneness, the sense of diversity vanishes and the cause of misery is removed.*

## VIII

He (the Self) is all-encircling, resplendent, bodiless, spotless, without sinews, pure, untouched by sin, all-seeing, all-knowing, transcendent, self-existent; He has disposed all things duly for eternal years.

*This text defines the real nature of the Self. When our mind is cleansed from the dross of matter, then alone can we behold the vast, radiant, subtile, ever-pure and spotless Self, the true basis of our existence.*

## IX

They enter into blind darkness who worship Avidya (ignorance and delusion); they fall, as it were, into greater darkness who worship Vidya (knowledge).

## X

By Vidya one end is attained; by Avidya, another. Thus we have heard from the wise men who taught this.

## XI

He who knows at the same time both Vidya and Avidya, crosses over death by Avidya and

attains immortality through Vidya.

*Those who follow or “worship” the path of selfishness and pleasure (Avidya), without knowing anything higher, necessarily fall into darkness; but those who worship or cherish Vidya (knowledge) for mere intellectual pride and satisfaction, fall into greater darkness, because the opportunity which they misuse is greater.*

*In the subsequent verses Vidya and Avidya are used in something the same sense as “faith” and “works” in the Christian Bible; neither alone can lead to the ultimate goal, but when taken together they carry one to the Highest. Work done with unselfish motive purifies the mind and enables man to perceive his undying nature. From this he gains inevitably a knowledge of God, because the Soul and God are one and inseparable; and when he knows himself to be one with the Supreme and Indestructible Whole, he realizes his immortality.*

## XII

They fall into blind darkness who worship the Unmanifested and they fall into greater darkness who worship the manifested.

## XIII

By the worship of the Unmanifested one end is attained; by the worship of the manifested, another. Thus we have heard from the wise men who taught us this.

## XIV

He who knows at the same time both the Unmanifested (the cause of manifestation) and the destructible or manifested, he crosses over death through knowledge of the destructible and attains immortality through knowledge of the First Cause (Unmanifested).

*This particular Upanishad deals chiefly with the Invisible Cause and the visible manifestation, and the whole trend of its teaching is to show that they are one and the same, one being the outcome of the other hence no perfect knowledge is possible without simultaneous comprehension of both. The wise men declare that he who worships in a one-sided way, whether the visible or the invisible, does not reach the highest goal. Only he who has a co-ordinated understanding of both the visible and the invisible, of matter and spirit, of activity and that which is behind activity, conquers Nature and thus overcomes death. By work, by making the mind steady and by following the prescribed rules given in the Scriptures, a man gains wisdom. By the light of that wisdom he is able to perceive the Invisible Cause in all visible forms. Therefore the wise man sees Him in every manifested form. They who have a true conception of God are never separated from Him. They exist in Him and He in them.*

## XV

The face of Truth is hidden by a golden disk. O Pushan (Effulgent Being)! Uncover (Thy face) that I, the worshipper of Truth, may behold Thee.

## XVI

O Pushan! O Sun, sole traveller of the heavens, controller of all, son of Prajapati, withdraw Thy rays and gather up Thy burning effulgence. Now through Thy Grace I behold Thy blessed and glorious form. The Purusha (Effulgent Being) who dwells within Thee, I am He.

*Here the sun, who is the giver of all light, is used as the symbol of the Infinite, giver of all wisdom. The seeker after Truth prays to the Effulgent One to control His dazzling rays, that his eyes, no longer blinded by them, may behold the Truth. Having perceived It, he proclaims: "Now I see that that Effulgent Being and I are one and the same, and my delusion is destroyed." By the light of Truth he is able to discriminate between the real and the unreal, and the knowledge thus gained convinces him that he is one with the Supreme; that there is no difference between himself and the Supreme Truth; or as Christ said, "I and my Father are one."*

## XVII

May my life-breath go to the all-pervading and immortal Prana, and let this body be burned to ashes. Om! O mind, remember thy deeds! O mind, remember, remember thy deeds! Remember!

*Seek not fleeting results as the reward of thy actions, O mind! Strive only for the Imperishable. This Mantram or text is often chanted at the hour of death to remind one of the perishable nature of the body and the eternal nature of the Soul. When the clear vision of the distinction between the mortal body and the immortal Soul dawns in the heart, then all craving for physical pleasure or material possession drops away; and one can say, let the body be burned to ashes that the Soul may attain its freedom; for death is nothing more than the casting-off of a worn-out garment.*

## XVIII

O Agni (Bright Being)! Lead us to blessedness by the good path. O Lord! Thou knowest all our deeds, remove all evil and delusion from us. To Thee we offer our prostrations and supplications again and again.

Here ends this Upanishad

### **COMMENTARY BY SWAMI PARAMANANDA**

*This Upanishad is called Isa-Vasya-Upanishad, that which gives Brahma-Vidya or knowledge of the All-pervading Deity. The dominant thought running through it is that we cannot enjoy life or realize true happiness unless we consciously "cover" all with the Omnipresent Lord. If we are not fully conscious of that which sustains our life, how can we live wisely and perform our duties? Whatever we see, movable or immovable, good or bad, it is all "That." We must not divide our conception of the universe; for in dividing it, we have only fragmentary knowledge and we thus limit ourselves.*

*He who sees all beings in his Self and his Self in all beings, he never suffers; because when he sees all creatures within his true Self, then jealousy, grief and hatred vanish. He alone can love. That All-pervading One is self-effulgent, birthless, deathless, pure, untainted by sin and sorrow. Knowing this, he becomes free from the bondage of matter and transcends death. Transcending death means realizing the difference between body and Soul and identifying oneself with the Soul. When we actually behold the undecaying Soul within us and realize our true nature, we no longer identify ourselves with the body which dies and we do not die with the body.*

*Self-knowledge has always been the theme of the Sages; and the Upanishads deal especially with the knowledge of the Self and also with the knowledge of God, because*

*there is no difference between the Self and God. They are one and the same. That which comes out of the Infinite Whole must also be infinite; hence the Self is infinite. That is the ocean, we are the drops. So long as the drop remains separate from the ocean, it is small and weak; but when it is one with the ocean, then it has all the strength of the ocean. Similarly, so long as man believes himself to be separate from the Whole, he is helpless; but when he identifies himself with It, then he transcends all weakness and partakes of Its omnipotent qualities.*

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