

The Kanva and Madhyandina Recensions of the Isha Upanishad: Exegetical Notes and Translations

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In this series of articles, we will be guided by the following general principle: the deeper one comprehends the Veda, the more one unravels the mysteries in the Upanishads. Our primary sources of inspiration are the writings of Sri Aurobindo^[1,2] and Ananda Coomaraswamy^[4]. In this article, we take several verses from the Isha Upanishad as an illustration of this general principle.

THE CONTEXT OF THE ISHA UPANISHAD IN THE YAJURVEDA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The Isha Upanishad is the last chapter (Chapter 40) of the Shukla Yajurveda and derives its name from the first word of this last chapter. We read in the Srimad Bhagavata that the Shukla Yajurveda was revealed to Vajasaneya Yajnavalkya by Aditya, so it would be reasonable to take Yajnavalkya to be the “author” of this work. The Isha Upanishad traditionally has two recensions, the Kanva and the Madhyandina (see [8, page 150] for the Madhyandina recension).

While writing his commentary on the Isha Upanishad, Adi Shankara followed the Kanva text which has eighteen verses. We feel that it would benefit us immensely if we keep both recensions clearly in view when we read this Upanishad, more so since the latter half of both these recensions have subtle differences. We will have occasions to see more of this in our future discussions.

Hiranmayena patrena satyasya apihitam mukham,

Tat tvam Pushan apavru satya dharmaya drstaye. - 15

By a Golden platter is covered the face (or door) (mukham) of Truth; that face do you unveil (apaav.r.nu) (or that door do you open) O Pushan, that I may contemplate with my eyes the Dharma of Truth. (Compare Sri Aurobindo [2])

Pushan, eka rshe, Yama, Surya, Prajapatya vyuha rashmin samuha,
Tejo yat te rupam kalyanatamam, tat te pasyami.^(a) Yosavasau Purushah
sohamasmi. - 16

O Pushan, O Sole Rishi, O Yama, O Surya, O power of Prajapati, marshal your rays, gather your light; the fiery-energy which is your most blessed form, that in you I behold and experience. Yonder Purusha there I my-Self am He! (Compare [2])

In his brief lecture^[10] on the Isha Upanishad, Swami Vivekananda gives an interpretative rendering of these verses as “Thou sun, who hast covered the Truth with thy golden disc, do thou remove the veil, so that I may see the Truth that is within thee. I have known the Truth that is within thee, I have known what is the real meaning of thy rays and thy glory and have seen That which shines in thee; the Truth in thee I see, and That which is within thee is within me, and I am that.”

In the traditional commentaries (based on the one by Shankara), these two hymns are treated as a “dying-man’s prayer” (see for instance Radhakrishnan (see [6, page 577])). That there is very little in support of this interpretation is our submission. In our opinion, this is a triumphant chant of a Seer who is at the culmination of his experience of the highest identification.^(b) This is consistent with the view expressed by Swami Sarvagatananda in his exposition of the Isha Upanishad. In [9, p.106] he states “This is a prayer of the struggling soul in the last stages before illumination”. Again, in [9, p.109] he states “This is not at the point of death; the devotee is prepared to die to realize that ... Even if he faces death he will not cease his struggle.”

This is supported by the Madhyandina recension which we give below, especially because of the placement of the hymn in the text of this recension.

In the Kanva recension, these are verses 15 and 16. In the Madhyandina recension, unlike the Kanva, it is the last two verses of the Upanishad, namely 16 and 17 and goes as follows:

Hiranmayena patrena satyasya apihitam mukham,
yosava aditye Purushah sosavaham. -16

By a Golden platter is covered the face (or door) (mukham) of Truth; the Purusha within the Supernal Sun Him, I my-Self am!

Om Kham Brahma. - 17
Om the Void is Brahman

We trace back to a possible source of inspiration for the hymn in the Isha. It is the following hymn from the fifth Mandala of the Rig Veda, a book attributed to the Atri family of rishis. The hymn is addressed to the solar deities Mitra-Varuna.

rtena rtam apihitam dhruvam vam Suryasya yatra vimucyanti ashvan.
dasa sata saha tasthuh tad ekam devanam shreshtam vapusham apasyam. -
5.62.1

By an Order of Truth is veiled that ever-standing Truth of yours where they release the horses of the Sun; there the ten hundreds stand still together;

That One, the body of the the highest (most glorious) among the Gods, I have seen and experienced. (Sri Aurobindo [1])

The Rishi's realization of Order overlaid by a Higher Order (*rtena rtam apihitam*), the Higher moveless Truth covered by a dazzling Truth, is much as in the Isha Upanishad. The Rishi sees that one order of realization is so overpowering that its glory even obscures the vision of an even greater order of reality.

A few words of explanation are needed on the translation, especially because we see the older Vedic term *rta* here instead of *satya* in the Upanishad.

The word *Satya* comes from the root *as*, to be, to exist, therefore "esse". *Sat* is the present participle connoting "Being", likewise *essence*, from *esse*, while *Satya* is "beingness", "the state or condition of Reality". It has come to be termed "Truth".

The word *rta* comes from the root \mathbb{F} , which is to move, to act, and therefore *rta* is the *Truth dynamis*, or *Truth in movement*, or *manifested Truth*. *Rta* is also accurately rendered as Cosmic Order from Greek *cosmos*, Latin *ordo*.

The word *rta* is peculiar to the Veda and finds lesser usage in the Upanishad although one see its negation *anrta* in the Upanishad as something opposed to Truth. The word *Ritu* brings out the significance of the word *rtam* as the regular and ordered succession of Time, known now as *seasons*.

The simultaneous occurrence of the words *Satyam* and *Rtam* in the same line of many texts gives a clear indication that there is a distinction between them. For instance, we see in the Taittiriya Samhita, V 1.5.9 ([7, Page 201]), *iyam va rtam asau (aditya) satyam*. meaning *as the Supernal-Sun is the Truth, all this is the Order*. *Rtam* is distinct from *satyam* even as an application is distinct from the principle in which the application subsists.

From *Satya*, the Truth of Being, emanates the flow of *Rta*, *rta-sya dhaara*, and its flow-lines become the cosmic order. *Rta* is the Dynamic Reality in the Universe, the Universal Rhythm manifest-

ed under the Sun of Truth. The emergence of Order in the Chaos is the coming into being of the Cosmos. When the seer of the Isha prays to Pushan to contemplate with his eyes the *Satya Dharma*, he prays to behold the law of the Truth, to behold the *Rta*.

We will take up the role of Pushan, his identification with Yama and Surya, his being called the Sole Seer in this hymn, and his brotherhood with the solar deities Mitra and Varuna, in a subsequent article.

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NOTES

- (a) In the previous line the word used was derived from *drishti* and here it is from *pas*; both words could be loosely translated as "to see", but the words in those times carried a larger burden. *Pasyah* carries the meaning of a "mystical, visionary experiencing", while *drishti* carries a sense of "contemplation with eyes".
- (b) The Upanishads are the expression of a mind in which philosophy and religion and poetry are made one, because this religion does not end with a cult nor is limited to a religio-ethical aspiration, but rises to an infinite discovery of God, of Self, of our highest and whole reality of spirit and being and speaks out of an ecstasy of luminous knowledge and an ecstasy of moved and fulfilled experience, this philosophy is not an abstract intellectual speculation about Truth or a structure of the logical intelligence, but Truth seen, felt, lived, held by the inmost mind and soul in joy of utterance of an assured discovery and possession. ³

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