

# Svarajya Siddhih: Attaining Self-dominion

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Translated from Sanskrit and annotated by Swami Narasimhananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

## Renunciation of Desires

**O**BJECTION: Cannot it be said that the *Isha Upanishad* presents the concepts of action and knowledge of Brahman and then goes on to show the conjunction between the two?

Reply: That position cannot be maintained because it will go against the content of the Upanishad that begins with the words ‘*isā vāsyamidam sarvam*; all this should be covered by the Lord.’<sup>46</sup> And as part of the process of attaining the knowledge of Brahman, the same Upanishad talks of renunciation through the words, ‘*tena tyaktena bhunñjithāḥ*; protect [your Self] through that detachment’ (ibid.). The suggested position would be against renunciation. The word *tyaktena* has been used here to mean renunciation only and not action. Used separately, the root word *tyajih*, from which *tyakta* has been derived, means only complete renunciation as represented by sannyasa. The Upanishad further says that through complete renunciation, sannyasa, the Atman should be nourished, protected. Thus, the ending of the mantra with the words, ‘*mā gṛdhah kasyasviddhanam*; do not covet anybody’s wealth’ is proper in this context, where attachment has been prohibited. The stance that the suffix *ta* has been used in *tyaktena* to mean action has been refuted by Acharya Shankara in his commentary. He writes: ‘He, who is thus engaged in the thought of the Self as God, has competence only for renouncing the three

kinds of desire for son etc. [wealth and worlds], and not for *karma*. *Tena tyaktena*, through that detachment. *Tyaktena* means, through detachment, (and not “by any abandoned thing”); for, a son or a servant, when abandoned or dead, does not protect one, since he has no connection with oneself. So the meaning of the Vedic word (*tyaktena*) is indeed this—“through renunciation”.<sup>47</sup>

Swami Vivekananda explains the need for renunciation:

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. ... 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. ...

Do not desire anything. What makes us miserable? The cause of all miseries from which we suffer is desire. You desire something, and the desire is not fulfilled; the result is distress. If there is no desire, there is no suffering. But here, too, there is the danger of my being misunderstood. So it is necessary to explain what I mean by giving up desire and becoming free from all misery. The walls have no desire and they never suffer.

True, but they never evolve. This chair has no desires, it never suffers; but it is always a chair. There is a glory in happiness, there is a glory in suffering. If I may dare to say so, there is a utility in evil too. The great lesson in misery we all know. There are hundreds of things we have done in our lives which we wish we had never done, but which, at the same time, have been great teachers. As for me, I am glad I have done something good and many things bad; glad I have done something right, and glad I have committed many errors, because every one of them has been a great lesson. I, as I am now, am the resultant of all I have done, all I have thought. Every action and thought have had their effect, and these effects are the sum total of my progress.

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 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.<sup>48</sup>

### **Knowledge is Superior to Actions**

Therefore, words like *kurvanneveha* relate to ignorance. The ignorant who advocate the

performance of good actions say that bad effects of actions cannot be eradicated without the performance of actions till one's death. However, the *Isha Upanishad* holds that the knowledge of Brahman is superior to the performance of actions; hence, it first denounces those who have not attained Self-knowledge and then talks about the knowledge of Brahman: 'What delusion and what sorrow can there be for that seer of oneness. He is all pervasive, pure.'<sup>49</sup> This statement is supported by statements in other Upanishads, like, 'A knower of the Self goes beyond sorrow'<sup>50</sup> and 'Therefore it became all.'<sup>51</sup> The superiority of the knowledge of Brahman is thus established by the result of its taking one beyond sorrow and making a person one with all. The mantra, '*vidyāṁ cāvīdyāṁ ca*; worship and Vedic rites'<sup>52</sup> does not relate to the conjunction of the knowledge of Brahman and actions, but it relates to *aparā vidyā*, like the worship of Prana and the like. Therefore, in this context, words like, '*mṛtyuṁ tīrtvā*; crossing over death' (ibid.) mean natural death, which is a sign of the knowledge of Vedic rites and the absence of the knowledge of Brahman. Having crossed such death and becoming one with various gods, one becomes immortal. Here immortality is the condition of becoming one with the gods. Also, the mantra '*sambhūtiṁ ca vināśaṁ ca*; the unmanifested and the destruction' (14) relates only to the conjunction of the worship of the manifested and the unmanifested. Therefore, the meaning here is that death, which is a sign of not being supernatural, should be crossed. And immortality, which here means becoming one with Prakriti, is attained.

If the conjunction of the knowledge of Brahman and actions were meant in both the instances mentioned above, then in statements like, '*pūṣannekarṣe*; O Sun, O solitary traveller' (16) the travel towards East will also become irrelevant, because a knower of Brahman has no

movement as told in the statement, 'na tasya prānā utkrānti; his organs do not depart.'<sup>53</sup>

Objection: If this be so, what is the relevance of unnecessarily talking of the conjunction of actions and worship? If the conjunction of the knowledge of Brahman and performance of actions were not intended, then why should the scripture suddenly talk of the conjunction of actions and worship?

Reply: In the mantra 'īśā vāśyam' the detachment of the renunciate and the resultant sannyasa is meant. In the next mantra, the allegiance to actions by a person who wants to live long is spoken of. The elaborate explanation of the actions are presented in the Brahmanas of the Vedas. Renunciation has been explained in other portions of the Vedas like the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. To briefly depict these two tendencies of action and renunciation, the subsequent five mantras of the *Isha Upanishad* speak of knowledge and the rest speak of actions. This is the meaning that can be churned out of the mantras. Though this meaning of the mantras seems to be closer to actions, it is not so because a person established in the knowledge of the unattached, unaffected, unchanging Atman, which is Existence-Consciousness-Knowledge Absolute, becomes unfit to perform any action. Though there is a system of rituals in the Vedas, the knower of Brahman is unable to perform any of them. Therefore, the person who has only the knowledge of the 'Mantra' and 'Brahmana' portions of the Vedas, which speak of rituals, has the right to perform actions. Otherwise, a person who has seen the true meaning of the Vedas cannot perform any actions. In a similar manner, the argument of the proponents of the conjunction of worship and knowledge is also quashed because worship is nothing but mental action.

Sri Ramakrishna speaks of his experience, which is illustrative of how one who has the

knowledge of Brahman becomes unfit to perform rituals:

After a man has attained samadhi all his actions drop away. All devotional activities, such as worship, japa, and the like, as well as all worldly duties, cease to exist for such a person. ... After attaining samadhi, I once went to the Ganges to perform tarpan. But as I took water in the palm of my hand, it trickled down through my fingers. Weeping, I said to Haladhari, 'Cousin, what is this?' Haladhari replied, 'It is called galitahasta [inert and benumbed hand] in the holy books.' After the vision of God, such duties as the performance of tarpan drop away.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, besides protecting one from the harm arising out of their non-performance, *nitya*, regular and *naimittika*, special, actions cannot be taken in conjunction with the knowledge of Brahman and cannot be considered as a means of liberation. In fact, these actions give the results of attaining various worlds, like the *pitṛloka*, world of manes. They result in the creation of new bodies necessary for enjoying these worlds, thereby making liberation impossible. The next verse depicts this and explains the means of attaining the knowledge of Brahman.

(To be continued)

## References

46. *Isha Upanishad*, 1.
47. *Īśā Upaniṣad, with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2010), 9.
48. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 2.146-8.
49. *Isha Upanishad*, 7-8.
50. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 7.1.3.
51. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.4.9.
52. *Isha Upanishad*, 11.
53. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 4.4.6.
54. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 151.