
UNIT 10 ĪŚĀ UPANIṢAD*

Structure

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10.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you are expected to know the essential contents of the *Upaniṣad* such as:

- the meaning of the term ‘*upaniṣad*’ (and also ‘*Īśāvāsya*’) and its place in Indian Philosophy.
- the significance and approach of *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*.
- the theme of the Creation and the Created.
- the power of discrimination (*viveka*).
- *vidyā* (knowledge) and *avidyā* (nescience).
- the meaning of *vairāgya* (renunciation), *karma* (action), and *upāsanā*
- the fusion of *vairāgya*, *karma*, and *upāsanā*.
- the importance of Self-knowledge
- the idea of holism represented by the symbol AUM (ॐ) and *Pūrṇa* as the way of seeking the Truth/ Ultimate Reality.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

The word ‘*Upaniṣad*’ means ‘to sit near’ a guru which destroys the ignorance of the pupil. There are 108 acknowledged *Upaniṣads*, out of which ten are very important because *Śaṅkarācārya* (780 A.D.) wrote his commentary on them. *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* is the second shortest of the principal *Upaniṣads* containing eighteen verses, and it is found in Śukla Yajurveda Saṁhitā. It is also called *Īśa Upaniṣad*. However, the word ‘*Īśāvāsya*’ literally means ‘pervaded by the inner controller’, and it tries to encapsulate the idea of the immanence of *Īśāna* (God as the inner controller) of the world.

*Mr. Ajay Jaiswal, Doctoral Research Scholar, Centre for Philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Moreover, the *Upaniṣad* also guides us to engage in selfless action with a view of holistic development. The *Upaniṣad* is so profound that scholars have famously said that even if all the Vedic literature is lost, with the help of *Īśāvāsya* entire wisdom can be regained. Some scholars have also tried to establish the correlation between the eighteen verses of this *Upaniṣad* and the eighteen chapters of *Bhagavadgīta*. In this unit, we shall discuss the central idea of those eighteen verses.

10.2 AN OVERVIEW

Īśāvāsya contains the essence of all the *Upaniṣads*. However, unlike other major *Upaniṣads*, it opens abruptly without any philosophical background story and setting. However, a deeper look at the general setting of the *Upaniṣads* reveals that the Upanishadic contents aim to answer the most fundamental questions of the Existence. Similarly, *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* also aims to deal with the problem of the Ultimate Reality and to provide an answer in terms of the unity of Ātman and Brahman. In its invocation mantra, *Īśāvāsya* declares the truth regarding the Universe and human's place in it in a holistic way. The whole is described as 'Pūrṇa'. Its symbol is AUM. Furthermore, it also envisions parts as non-different from Pūrṇa just as a drop is not different from the ocean. The term '*darśana*' is often interpreted as the vision – a holistic and unified vision of the whole universe. 'Pūrṇa' indicates this idea of holistic knowledge.

Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad is also unique and special in its description of God and the Universe (the Creator and the Created). Many philosophical traditions consider the Creator and the Created to be separate just like a watchmaker is different from the watch. However, the Upanishadic idea is that the Creator is not different from the Creation. He is transcendent as well as immanent in the world.

Also, it is important to address here how the *Upaniṣad*, keeping this fundamental insight of the Creator and the Created, approaches the path of action along with renunciation. To establish this path, different *Upaniṣads* follow different approaches. For example, *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* mentions the doctrine of the five sheaths (*pañca kośa*); *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* mentions the doctrine of the three bodies (*śarīra traya*), and so on. But this *Upaniṣad* declares the Truth directly. It directly renders the vision of the Lord as the immanent and transcendent cause of the Universe and based on this ontological understanding it provides a reconciliation of the way of renunciation (*vairāgya*) with action (*karma*) and devotion (*Upāsana*).

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the meaning of the terms '*upaniṣad*'?

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2. State briefly the meaning of 'Īśāvāsyā' in order to understand the nature of Reality.

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10.3 REFLECTION ON THE CORE ISSUES/ CONCEPTS

From the very outset, *Īśa Upaniṣad* gives a direct understanding about the universe and the ethics that ensues from this understanding. The core ideas of the *Upaniṣad* can be understood in the following headings:

A. Lord and the World

As we noted above, the first verse of *Īśāvāsyā* describes the relationship that exists between the Creator and the Created as the unique approach of understanding the Universe in its totality (Pūrṇa) and engages ourselves in self-less action.

īśāvāsyamidamsarvaṃ yatkiñca jagatyām jagat |
tena tyaktena bhuñjīthā mā ḡrdhaḥ kasyasviddhanam ||

Īśa Upaniṣad (Verse 1)

There are following four dominant notions regarding the relationship between the Creator and the Created:

1. Deism – A Deity Created the universe set it to its basic functioning but is no longer involved in the function of the Creation. There is no divine intervention in the functioning of the Universe.
2. Theism – A Deity Created the universe, set it to functioning, and is actively involved in the sustenance and destruction of the Universe.
3. Pantheism – A Deity or the Ultimate Principle is the inner essence of the entire universe.
4. Panentheism – A Deity is the inner essence of the entire cosmos, and That (Deity) is transcendental also.

The Upanishadic idea of Creation goes beyond these four notions (although it is akin to panentheism). Instead of Creation, more appropriately, the Universe is a manifestation of one non-dual principle- Īśavara, Brhman, or Ātman which is not only immanent but also transcendent and indescribable. This fusion of the Creator and the Creation tends to answer the age-old question of metaphysics, i.e., is the universe changing or permanent? Is it Being or Becoming? Is it Real or unreal? The answer is that it is both- real as well as unreal- a blend of Being and becoming. It occupies jagat (the movable) and the *Īśa* too (the immovable controller). Vedānta says that Brahman has five aspects- Sat (Existence), Cit (Consciousness), *Ānanda*; and *nāma* (name) and *rūpa* (form). The first three

represent the Real (Being) aspect of Brahman; and the last two represent the becoming or changing aspect of Brahman. However, the latter is merely a projection. The jagat is neither *sat* nor *asat*. It is only the phenomenal appearance of the Real Brahman. The appearance (nāma and rūpa) of jagat changes but the inner essence (the Lord) remains the same. *Saccidānanda* is the substratum of the entire being. Just like different waves may have different names and forms yet the inner essence of all the waves (as the formula of water) remains the same.

B. *Vidyā* and *Avidyā* (the Metaphysical Knowledge and Nescience) –

Vidyā and *avidyā* literally mean knowledge and ignorance respectively. However, it has many other related connotations and here it would be appropriate to understand the ontological meaning of these terms. *Avidyā* or *ajñana* means not having Self-realization or incorrect ontological understanding of Self and the world. This ignorance has two sides- the concealment (*āvaraṇa*) and the projection (*vikṣepa*). As *āvaraṇa*, *Avidyā* conceals our true nature as Pure Self. On the other hand, *Avidyā* as *vikṣepa* projects many pseudo identifications and the related false worldviews. This ignorance associated with *Jīva* (individual ego) is *anadi* (i.e., without any beginning). However, it is *śānt*, i.e., it can be ended; and the right antidote for ignorance can only be Knowledge, i.e., *vidyā*. The substance of *vidyā* is best illustrated by Vedānta Mahāvākyas such as *tat tvam asi*, i.e., Thou are That.

The *Upaniṣad* attaches immense importance to this knowledge of Self (*ātma vidyā*). Every other knowledge arises and perishes and has only instrumental value. Self-knowledge has intrinsic value and is capable of setting human beings free from all the sufferings. The seeking of Self-knowledge is called *mumukṣa* in Vedānta and not having *mumukṣa* means those people what this *Upaniṣad* calls *ātma hanaḥ janāḥ*, i.e., those who commit suicide (spiritual). The *Upaniṣad* says metaphorically that they enter into the realm of dark species where there is grave suffering.

asurya nāma te lokā andhena tamasāvṛtāḥ |

tāmste pretyābhigacchanti ye ke cātmahano janāḥ ||

Īśa Upaniṣad (Verse 3)

C. *Viveka* and *Vairāgya* (Wisdom and Renunciation)-

The above ontological understanding or the discrimination between Real and Unreal is called *viveka*. It is to discriminate between *vidyā* and *avidyā*. *Vairāgya* (renunciation) is the byproduct of this understanding. The second line of the first verse indicates at this notion of *Vairāgya*. *Viveka* and *Vairāgya* constitute the foundation of *sādhana chatuṣṭaya*. Here, the *Upaniṣad* is not suggesting a forced renunciation. It is a merely a product of the understanding that what we think as Real (the name and form) is unreal and there is no point in holding to the transient entities. It is *nivṛtasya nivṛtti* and *prāptasya prāpti*, i.e., it is renouncing which is already renounced and can never belong to us, and it is acquiring or remembering what we already have (our true nature as *Saccidānanda*). Hence, *viveka* is that faculty of mind which discriminates between Real and unreal and so that *Vairāgya* is born with a mindset which pursues the Real and relinquishes

the unreal. The first verse suggests that one must be contented with what one has got, what belongs to others should not disturb his tranquility of mind. Therefore, the injunction – *mā gr̥dha-* do not greed as everything is transient and nothing can really belong to anybody. Everything in jagat is a mere projection.

D. *Dharma* (Duties and the Way of Action) –

When one attains the right knowledge (*viveka*) and *Vairāgya* (renunciation) the immediate question may arise- what a person should do? Should he renounce the world and go into forests or seclusion? Or should he be in society and feed on it like a parasite? No. The *Upaniṣad* is not teaching escapism or karma *sanyāsa-* that the actions altogether should be rejected or established rules should be flouted. *Bhagavadgīta* also says one cannot live even for a second without performing action and its mystery is exceptionally profound. And when one is bound to do actions, then he must choose the right actions. The actions should not be merely based on desires but in accordance with reason and intuition. The intuition here implies not only one's own intuition but the entire wisdom of the ancient Ṛṣis who formulated the system of *puruṣārtha-* the four duties of human beings. *Kama* (desires) and *artha* (wealth) can be pursued, but they should be restrained by the law of *Dharma*. This way of practicing *kama* and *artha* leads to liberation (*mokṣa*) which is the *parama puruṣārtha* (the final goal) of life. *Dharma* can be of two types-

1. *Sādhāraṇa Dharma* (General Duties)

These are simple universal moral codes of conduct, e.g., non-stealing, non-violence, truthfulness, non-possessiveness, self-control, inner and outer purity (*śauca*), etc.

2. *Viśeṣa Dharma* (Special Duties)

They are not applicable to all but to the specialized people. *Viśeṣa dharma* includes *varṇa dharma* (viz. *Brāhmin*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*); and *āśrama dharma* (the four stages of life as *brahmacharya*, *vānaprastha*, *gṛhastha*, and *sanyāsa*).

Adhering to the above metaphysical wisdom and the code of conduct, *Īśa Upaniṣad* commands that one should strive to live for hundred years. The cycle of karma and rebirth is extremely complex yet when one performs his duties in the above way (the *niṣkāma* way), he is not bound by the *karmas*. He is set free and full of rejoice.

kurvanneveha karmāṇi jijīviṣet satam samāḥ
evaṃ tvayi nānyatheto'sti na karma lipyate nare...

Īśa Upaniṣad (Verse 2)

E. *Upāsanā* (The Way of Devotion) –

Along with the *samyaka* (right) understanding of ontology, renunciation, and action, the *Upaniṣad* also reveals the secret of devotion (*Upāsanā*). The term *Upāsanā* may have had many connotations concerning rituals and worshiping, but the core of *Upāsanā* is the vision of unity or oneness of *Īśvara* everywhere. Only this knowledge of immanence and transcendence of *Īśvara* paves the way

for the true renunciation. *Upāsanā* also covers performing one's duties with the sense of serving Īśvara or for the welfare of all sentient and non-sentient Creation. Hence, karma and dharma should be grounded in this *Upāsanā* of the Lord.

Some aspirants think the Creation (kārya Brahma) to be separate from the Īśvara (kāraṇa Brahma) and worship only one of these aspects. It is a grave misunderstanding to consider them ontologically different and thus engage in particularistic worship or *Upāsanā*. The *Upaniṣad* describes, with the help of the metaphor of the realm of great darkness, that the worshippers of both the kinds fall into it.

andhaṃ tamaḥ praviśanti ye'sambhūtimupāsate |

tato bhūya iva te tamo ya u sambhūtyā ratāḥ ||

Īśa Upaniṣad (Verse 12)

Thus the core of *Upāsanā* is to have bhagvada dṛṣṭi, i.e., the vision of the Lord everywhere- not only in His Creation but also in actions performed out of the respect of duty and for the welfare of sentient beings. However, there lurks the final danger in the path of a seeker that he may engage in such prescribed actions yet be full of ahaṅkāra (ego) although of sātāvika (spiritual) type. The *Upaniṣad* warns us against the idea of cultivating ego while performing any duty. The ultimate renunciation is nothing but the renunciation of the ego of the doership. This realization is best practiced with a desire of total surrender. Therefore, *Upaniṣad* in its last few verses surrenders and prays to the Almighty with the symbol of the light of the Sun. However, in all this *karma*, *Vairāgya*, and *Upāsanā*, the vision of the oneness of the Lord is grasped with full rigor. The *Upaniṣad* prays to the Lord to bestow upon such supreme realization.

hiraṇmayena pātreṇa satyasyāpihitam mukham |

tattvam pūṣannapāvṛṇu satyadharmāya dṛṣṭaye ||

Īśa Upaniṣad (Verse 15)

pūṣannekarṣe yamasūrya prājāpatya vyūha raśmīn samūha |

tejo yatte rūpaṃ kalyāṇatamaṃ tatte paśyāmi yo'sāvasau puruṣaḥ so'hamasmi ||

Īśa Upaniṣad (Verse 16)

10.4 PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSE

Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad has had tremendous ramifications in all thoughts of Indian Philosophy. It represents the essence of Vedic knowledge. Although there are many unresolved issues regarding the structure, contents of verse, and various Vedāntic interpretations of the *Upaniṣad* yet its overwhelming significance cannot be denied. There are other *Upaniṣads* which rely on various background settings, stories, dialogues, some methodology such as *avasthātraya*, *pañcakośa*, *śarīra-traya*, etc. but *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* declares the truth about the Universe directly and encapsulates the entire Vedic ethics in a nutshell. The injunction is straightforward, i.e., the path of renunciation where there is a fusion of action and devotion. Its invocation mantra also synoptically pictures the entire cosmos

in its totality (as Purna). It is because of this reason perhaps, thinkers like M.K. Gandhi said-

“If all the *Upaniṣads* and all the other scriptures happened all of a sudden to be reduced to ashes, and if only the first verse in the *Īśopaniṣad* were left in the memory of the Hindus, Hinduism would live forever.”

Paul Deussen has also recognized how beautifully this *Upaniṣad* has reconciled its metaphysics with the Vedic ethics. Swami Chinmayananda also said in his commentary-

“The very first stanza of this matchless *Upaniṣad* is in itself a miniature philosophical textbook. Besides being comprehensive in its enunciation of Truth, it provides a vivid exposition of the technique of realising the Truth in a language unparalleled in philosophical beauty and literary perfection. Its mantras are the briefest exposition on philosophy and each one is an exercise in contemplation.”

Many Indian sages have also correlated the eighteen verses of *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* with the eighteen chapters of Bhagavadgita. The reason might be that both the texts synoptically present the philosophy of *Upaniṣads*. Like Bhagavadgita, we find in *Īśāvāsya*, a unique blend of jñāna, karma, and *Upāsanā*. This holistic knowledge holds tremendous potency, and it paves the way for the ultimate realization, i.e., Mokṣa.

Check Your Progress II

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer
 b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Comment on the Upanishadic notion of *vidyā* and *Avidyā*.

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2. Write a note on the significance of 'AUM'.

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10.5 LET US SUM UP

To sum up, we can derive the following philosophical points from our discussion above pertaining to *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*-

1. The idea of holism is immanent there (in the invocation mantra itself), the

view that the mere study of parts cannot yield a complete knowledge of the universe. For a profound comprehension, the analysis of its micro and macro aspects is vital. The universe must be understood in its totality.

2. Metaphysically, there are two realms of Existence, the material, efficient, and the final cause of the world (as the Lord) and the Creation itself. However, it is more like a manifestation rather than Creation where there is oneness of everything.
3. Epistemologically, the knowledge of duality and false ego constitute *Avidyā*. The right ontological understanding is called *vidyā*. Also, *vidyā* paves the way for ethical and aesthetic fulfillment of life.
4. As a methodological approach (*sādhana*), the meditation on the totality of Cosmos is required. Renunciation is the by-product of the discrimination (*viveka*) between Real and unreal. Finally, this renunciation must fuse with *dharma* and *Upāsana*.
5. Axiologically, the realization of *Ātman* or Self holds the supreme value as Truth, Beauty, and Goodness; everything else entails suffering. Only *Ātman* or *Īśvara* becomes capable of rendering everlasting peace. Not engaging in the pursuit of Self-knowledge is termed as spiritual suicide.
6. Finally, the transcendental state of *Īśvara* and *Ātman* or the entire universe is essentially ineffable (*anirvacanīya*). It becomes a subject of direct realization, not of verbal exegesis. One must surrender to the Ultimate Lord and seek blessings for Self-realization.

10.6 KEY WORDS

Ātman	: The immanent and transcendental state of Consciousness. It is at par with the Lord or Nirguṇa Brahman. It is represented by the amatra (silence) at the end of AUM.
AUM	: The mystical symbol of wholeness or <i>Ātman</i> ; and also the supreme object of meditation. It is the symbol of Purna.
Avidyā	: It is the metaphysical nescience of not-knowing oneself and projecting differing egos with false worldviews.
Mahāvākya	: The mahāvākyas are the four great sayings of <i>Upaniṣads</i> of supreme importance in Vedānta philosophy. They are: 1- <i>prajñānam brahma</i> : <i>Aitareya Upaniṣad</i> , 3.3. 2- <i>aham brahmāsmi</i> : <i>Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad</i> , 1.4.10. 3- <i>tat tvam asi</i> : <i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i> , 6.8.7. 4- <i>ayam ātmā brahma</i> : <i>Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad</i> , 2.
Nirguṇa Brahman	: It denotes attributeless or formless aspects of Ultimate Reality. It can be contrasted with the creative aspect of Brahman which is

saguṇa Brahman. It is also known as Kāraṇa Brahman.

- Pañca Kośa** : The five sheaths of human personality, as explained in Taittirīya and other *Upaniṣads*. They are, namely, annamaya, prāṇamaya, manomaya, vijñānamaya, and ānandamaya kośa.
- Principal Upaniṣads** : These are also called mukhya *Upaniṣads*, widely studied in Vedānta philosophy. Śaṅkarācārya wrote commentaries on them. Generally, they are ten in numbers, namely- *Īśā (IsUp)*, *Yajurveda*, *Kena (KeUp)*, *Sāmaveda*, *Kaṭha (KaUp)*, *Yajurveda*, *Praśna (PrUp)*, *Atharvaveda*, *Muṇḍaka (MuUp)*, *Atharvaveda*, *Māṇḍūkya (MaUp)*, *Atharvaveda*, *Taittirīya (TaiUp)*, *Yajurveda*, *Aitareya (AiUp)*, *Ṛgveda*, *Chāndogya (ChhUp)*, *Sāmaveda*, and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka (BrUp)*, *Yajurveda*.
- Puruṣārtha** : It means the virtues or duties of human beings. They are four- dharma (duty), artha (wealth), kama (pleasures), and Mokṣa (liberation).
- Śarīra Traya** : The three bodies of human beings explained in *Upaniṣads*, namely, sthūla, sukṣma, and kāraṇa śarīra representing gross, subtle, and causal levels respectively.
- Vedānta** : It represents the teaching based on prasthantraya, the three great sources (texts), namely, *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad Gīta*, and *Brahmasūtra*.
- Vidyā** : It is the knowledge of Self or Ātman.
- Viveka** : It is a faculty of mind that discriminates between Real and unreal.

10.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. The term *Upaniṣad* is derived from the three Sanskrit root words- ‘upa’, ‘ni’, and ‘shad’, which literally means ‘to sit near’. In an Upanishadic setting, a disciple (śiṣya) sits near his master (guru). This symbolizes respect for the teacher. Through this setting the darkness of ignorance is dispelled away just by the light of Knowledge of the great statements about Ātman and Brahman. *Īśāvāsyā Upaniṣad* also serves the same purpose. The teachings based on *Upaniṣads* (also along with *Bhagavad Gīta* and *Brahmasutra*) are also called Vedānta. It is best encapsulated in Mahāvākyas which denote the oneness of the Self, the world, and the Lord.
2. The term *Īśāvāsyā* literally means - pervaded by the Lord or the inner controller of the Universe. It sheds light on how *Upaniṣads* understood the Creation. Precisely it shows how the world is a manifestation of the Lord who is within and without both. He is immanent as well as transcendent. The Lord is Real as the Existence, Consciousness, and Bliss while He alone is projected as the unreal jagat which is constituted of nāma (name) and rūpa (form). The realization of the oneness of a universal Lord is hinted by the title –*Īśāvāsyā*. It also conveys the idea of Pūrṇa, i.e., everything that ‘Is’ is essentially God.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. In Upanishadic parlance, the notion of *vidyā* and *Avidyā* is of supreme importance. *Avidyā* means, not knowing the reality about oneself, the world, and the Lord. It is to have a misidentification of ego, a perverted worldview, and the notion of the Lord as distant from oneself and the world. This ignorance as duality can only be removed by the jñāna or *vidyā*, i.e., the Self-realization where the universal Lord resides in its core. It is by virtue of this viveka and jñāna that one can truly renounce that which is unreal and is merely the projection of the Self. This renunciation is effortless as the by-product of *vidyā*. It also paves the way of performing one’s duties (dharma) as niṣkāma karma. The oneness also becomes the cornerstone of the way of devotion. Hence, in Vedānta, the root of all suffering is *Avidyā* while the real antidote is *vidyā*.
2. According to *Upaniṣads*, whatever is Real is realizable also. The Ultimate is not merely a logical hypothesis. Although the linguistic expression of the Ultimate Reality is almost impossible, yet, it does not mean that it can never be realized. There are several methods of its realization, and meditation on AUM is one of the most effective methods. AUM is the symbol of entire Reality. In the invocation mantra of *Īśāvāsyā Upaniṣad*, the AUM is described as Pūrṇa. A denotes jāgrat, U denotes svapna, M denotes suṣupti, and the silence at the end denotes Turīya, Ātman, or Brahman. It synoptically captures the entire notion of wholeness (sarva). Meditation over

its syllable has unique and profound advantages. AUM or Pūrṇa denotes Creator also and the Creation as well at all levels. Furthermore, not only in *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* but also in the entire Vedic tradition and other religions AUM became the symbol of auspiciousness and the object of the highest veneration. It can be synoptically presented as-

Īśa Upaniṣad

A	Jāgrat
U	Svapna
M	Suṣupti
Silence	Turīya

