

'God' in the Upanishads

1. God and self (Isha Upanishad, stanzas 1 & 4-8)

From the Vedas to the Upanishads, there is a general movement away from the myths and rituals of religious worship, towards philosophical questioning. In two of the main Upanishads, the concept of 'God' figures prominently; but it does so in the context of a reasoned enquiry into the nature of reality, knowledge and happiness.

Of these two Upanishads, one is called by the name 'Isha', which means 'God' or the 'Lord'. In Sanskrit, 'ish-' is a verbal root that means both to 'own' and to 'rule'. So, when God is called 'Isha', it implies that all things belong to God and that they are all governed by God.

The Isha Upanishad adds to this sense of divine belonging and governance, by saying that everything in the world is 'Isha-vasyam'. Literally, this means that everything is 'for the sake of God to live in'. The implication is clear. God is not some alien owner or ruler who dominates from a distance. Instead, God's presence is immediate, in everything. All things belong to that divine presence, whose home is everywhere. That presence is the single, inner life of the entire universe. Each thing perceived is just an outer habitation of that one inmost life. From that, all governance and guidance comes, in all acts and happenings. All things are for its sake.

Our bodies and our minds are no exception. Each body, each mind, each faculty of body or mind, each physical and mental act belongs to a single, divine presence that is called 'God'. That one presence lives in each personality. It rules each personality from deep within, beneath all outward names and forms and qualities.

That divine presence is obscured by our various personal claims, that our bodies and minds are personal owners and rulers of the life within them. In most of our personalities, there is an egotistical claim: that the personality belongs to its body or its mind. This claim makes it appear that our bodies or our minds are in charge, that they decide their acts and rule their personal experiences. This is a false pretence. It hides the true source from which our decisions and our experiences arise.

Each person's body and mind are driven instruments. They cannot be the real source of anyone's experience. If one looks for such a source, it may be conceived as a 'divine presence', beyond each body and each mind. It is that presence which lives truly, in every one of us. But most of us misunderstand it, by claiming that we personally own the life within us. Its purity of inner guidance gets confused, with the personal and petty will of our externally conditioned egos.

So, in the Isha Upanishad, a twofold approach is described. On the one hand, the ego's claims are surrendered; so that all changing things may be more truly enjoyed, as expressions of a divine presence. On the other hand, to enable this surrender, a simple question is asked. Whose are

these changing things that appear in the physical and mental world? What is the divine presence to which they belong?

And the answer is given that such a presence may be realized as atman: the real self that shines unmixed in everyone and everything, beneath all names and forms and qualities of personality and world.

The following translation is rather free:

All this entire universe
belongs to God: who lives in it,
in every smallest bit of it.

Thus giving up all things to God,
whatever changes in this changing
universe may be enjoyed:

untainted by possessiveness,
uncompromised by wanting it.

Whatever there may be to claim,
to whom, in truth, does it belong? 1

There is no movement in the one,
whose quickness far surpasses thought.
It's that which always goes before,
beyond the reach of sense and mind.

Outrunning alien things which run
on by (pursued or in pursuit),
it stands at rest within itself.

On it, all change and movement are
produced from subtle energy. 4

It moves; and yet it does not move.

It's far beyond the furthest reach
of space and time; and yet it is
immediate, forever close,
inseparably present here.

It's here inside, in everything;
yet it is outside all of this. 5

For one who sees all beings in
pure self alone, and just this self
in everyone and everything,
there's nothing found not to accept.

There's nothing alien anywhere,
from which to hide or shrink away. 6

There, in that knowing where all things,
all beings are but self alone,
what could be found inadequate?

Then what dissatisfaction or
delusion could apply at all:
in seeing that pure unity? 7

That self shines pure, through everything
unconstrained by muscled body,
unaffected by all ill,
uncouched by any taint of sin.

It's that which sees, direct within:
intelligent, encompassing,
depending only on itself.

From it all purposes have been
assigned, throughout unending time. 8

2. The rule of light (Shvetashvatara Upanishad, chapter 6)

It is all very well to say that everything is 'ruled by God' or by some ultimate 'self', but what exactly does that mean? What precisely is this 'God' or 'self', and how does it rule?

An answer is very briefly stated in the Isha Upanishad, stanza 8 (the last stanza translated in part 1 above). Here, 'God' or 'self' is described as pure light, unaffected by bodily constraints. From that unbodied light, all objectives are determined. God's rule is, quite simply, the rule of unaffected light.

In the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, this conception is described a little further. Here, there are many references to 'God': not only as 'Isha' or the 'Lord'; but, more often, as 'deva'. Both Sanskrit words, 'isha' and 'deva', can be translated as 'God'; but their roots are quite different. Where 'Isha' implies 'power' and 'domination', 'deva' implies 'light'.

In fact, the Sanskrit word 'deva' is related to the English 'divine'. They each imply the pure light of heaven, unmixed with the obscurities and the limitations of earthly things. So, while 'deva' can be translated as 'God', it can also be translated as the 'principle of light'.

That principle is also called 'consciousness'. It is the common principle of illumination in all experience. In our personalities, it is seen mixed with our limited faculties of mind and body, where it is found expressed. In the world outside, it is seen mixed with the limited objects and happenings that our faculties perceive. But in itself, it's quite unmixed, beyond all limitations.

Found thus unmixed, beneath its mixed appearances, it is the same everywhere: the one complete reality that all experience shows. It is one single consciousness, expressed in everything, throughout the universe.

This conclusion presents us with an immediate difficulty. If the whole universe expresses consciousness, then it is all alive. How can we make sense of that? We recognize that consciousness can be expressed in the feelings, thoughts and actions of living creatures. But how can we find any such expression in objects that are inanimate, like a rock or a mountain?

The difficulty arises because we think of consciousness as somehow tied to our personal faculties of mind and sense. Certainly, we do not find such faculties in a mountain or a rock, not even in some rudimentary form. But is it true that consciousness is tied to any mental or sensual faculties? Not really. If we take a dispassionate view of our personal faculties, they are only expressions of consciousness. They depend on it. Not it on them. It is their underlying ground, beneath their varying activities.

In fact, consciousness and life can be recognized in anything, depending on how we look at it.

On the one hand we can look at something as an object. It is then a piece of world. It's seen by looking outwards: at some picture of an external world. In such a picture, previous objects of perception are found pieced together; and the new object is interpreted by fitting it in with them. But, by thus fitting things together, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, we don't treat them as alive. Such external fitting builds our pictures of the world, but that alone does not show any consciousness expressed.

On the other hand, as we interpret our pictures, we have another way of looking at them. We can turn back from our objective picture-building, to look at something reflectively. Then it is seen as somehow akin to us. It shows us underlying principles of order, meaning and value. These are principles we share in common with it, at the depth of our experience. As we understand such principles in what is seen, we reflect back, into the ground of consciousness that underlies our pictures and perceptions of the world.

This is how we understand our own actions, thoughts and feelings, when we take them to express the consciousness we find in each of us. It is also how we understand the actions, thoughts and feelings of other living beings, as we communicate with them. For all such communication is based upon a common ground of consciousness.

And we can understand all nature in this way, reflectively: by falling deeper back into our own experience, to common principles that we find expressed within our personalities and in the world outside as well.

For example, suppose a scientist examines a rock, and then reflects upon its construction and its geological location. In this reflection, principles of order get touched upon, as ordered patterns and structures are seen to have some further meaning and function. Thus, principles of meaning and function get touched upon, and even lead to principles of value.

All these principles are naturally expressed in the rock and its geological terrain. And they are understood at the depth of the scientist's mind, by reflecting back there. They underlie the perceiving mind, and the perceived world as well. They are naturally inherent, in both mind and world.

When we thus reflect on nature, we treat it as alive. We then stop fitting bits of it into our imposed pictures. Instead, we listen to what it has to say. By this attitude of listening, we recognize (at least implicitly) that it expresses consciousness.

In the personalities of living creatures, nature's expression is personal, through personal faculties of body and mind. In objects like a rock, where no such faculties are found, nature's expression is impersonal. There nature speaks impersonally, but it speaks all the same. All order, meaning and value are natural expressions of consciousness, whether in personality or outside world. All nature is alive, as it expresses consciousness throughout the world.

In this view of nature, all happenings and faculties are included in it. No happening or faculty remains excluded, to drive nature or to perceive it from outside. In the microcosm of individual experience, nature includes the perceiving body and mind. In the macrocosm of the external world, nature includes all bodies and minds, with all their acts and faculties.

Thus understood, nature includes each act that moves things and each perception that makes things appear. From within itself, nature produces all of its acts and happenings. In this sense, it moves itself and appears by itself, of its own accord.

But as it moves and manifests itself, it inherently expresses consciousness. That is the source of all the order, meaning and value which we see in nature. That alone keeps nature regulated and coherent. Just that makes nature intelligible. That by itself is nature's underlying motivation. As nature acts, of its own accord, it does so for the sake of consciousness. It's thus that consciousness is seen expressed.

Since consciousness is pure light, it doesn't wish nature to do anything; it doesn't tell nature what to do; it doesn't interfere at all in what takes place. As consciousness shines unaffected through experience, it is the knowing ground beneath all acts and happenings. Unmoved itself by any act, it is the final ground of our experience. From it, all actions rise. On it, all actions take place. Back into it, all actions must return and be absorbed. So, naturally, all acts and happenings arise expressing it.

That is nature's basic inspiration. All nature is inspired, from within, by the very presence of consciousness, throughout experience. In a fundamental sense, it's only for the sake of consciousness that anything is done.

In short, consciousness is the unmoved mover, the originating cause of nature's manifestation. That is the position of the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, chapter 6, as translated very freely below.

Here, 'deva' is translated as 'God' or 'divinity' or the 'divine' or the 'principle of light'. 'Isha' is translated as the 'Lord' or 'ruler' or 'governor'.

Towards the end, stanza 6.20 is interpreted to show a curious ambivalence about the concept of 'God'. The stanza speaks of an 'end to grief ... for those who don't discern "God"'. It says that this is possible, when people 'roll up space as if it were an empty skin'. This can be interpreted to mean that space and time are not absolute. Their extension through the world is only a relative conception that stretches an observing mind from narrow objects to the entire universe.

When our minds are stretched out in this way, the concept of 'God' arises: as a universal consciousness that encompasses the universe. But when our minds reflect back deeply, beneath their superficial pictures; then all of space and time is seen enfolded there, in the microcosm of one's own individuality. The whole extent of space and time thus gets rolled up, and consciousness is seen unlimited in individual experience. There is no need then to universalize consciousness, through the concept of 'God'.

In the last stanza (6.23), devotion to a teacher is described as a way of love for the divine. Again, this can be interpreted as showing an individual approach, to the same truth that is more universally approached as 'God'.

Some poets, in delusion, speak
of 'self-becoming nature'.
Others, thus, of 'happening in time'.

But in the world, it's only by
the boundless shining of unmixed
illumination that the wheel
of all reality is turned. 6.1

That is complete reality,
containing the entire world.

And further, it's pure consciousness:
the changeless source of changing time,
the unconditioned, knowing ground
of all conditioned qualities.

As moments pass, it carries on:
enabling different qualities

to be compared in course of time,
and lighting all that's ever known.

Inspired by the unseen guidance
of this unconditioned light,
all world's conditioned acts unfold.

It gets to be conceived as the
solidity of earth, as water's
changing flow, as fire's radiance,
air's conditioning, and as
the continuity of space
and time, pervading everywhere. 6.2

In everyone's experience,
the world is known through various acts
of mind and body: rising up
from underlying consciousness
to take attention out to world,
and then returning back again
to take in what is thus perceived.

Time and again, each person acts;
to learn a little of the world.

And every act ends in its source
of underlying consciousness,
as what was learned becomes absorbed.

Here, where all things are understood,
one comes through various partial truths
to unity of final truth,
beneath all difference and change. 6.3

It's from this common, changeless ground
that all conditioned acts arise.

It is from here that different
occurrences co-ordinate.

But here itself, there are no acts
and no occurrences at all.
Here, all that has been done by doing
is entirely destroyed.

At doing's end, the truth remains:
shown other than the changing world
of seeming acts and happenings. 6.4

It is the first, the unifying,
unmoved cause, of causes that
are moved to act towards results.

Thus it is seen beyond all time,
found undivided into parts;

the truth that has of old been heeded
as a worshipped God: who's
manifested in all forms, who is
the happening of all that has
become, and who stands here within,
in everyone's own mind and heart. 6.5

Seen through the tree of branching
happenings that form in time, the truth
is known as something else, beyond.

From it, the whole created world
goes out and then returns, and is
thus cycled and recycled round:
as different appearances
succeed each other in our minds.

The 'Lord' who's worshipped with devotion
cleanses sin, removes all ill,
brings order, justice, harmony.

Thus known, He's that in which all things
come home. He is that principle
abiding here in everyone:
the self which does not change or die. 6.6

That is the ultimate, great 'Lord
of Lords', the ultimate
divinity of all divinities,
the ultimate controlling principle
of all controlling powers.

It's that which must be known beyond:
as 'Lord' of the becoming world,

the principle that is invoked
and worshipped through the name of 'God'. 6.7

It has itself no faculty
of doing anything; nor has
it anything that it must do.

Nor is there anything that is
its equal or superior.

Nor is there even anything
that is additional to it.

As the *transcendent* source of all
of nature's energy, it is
revealed in many different ways.

For it is also *immanent*:
as the inherent principle
of nature shared in common by
all faculties that know the world,
all capabilities of strength
and all the world's activities. 6.8

It has no ruler or controller
anywhere, in all the world.

Not has it an exclusive sign
whose absence shows it is not there;
for it is present everywhere.

It is the underlying cause,
the common guiding principle,
of all our guiding faculties.

It has no further source of birth,
nor any guiding principle,
found anywhere beyond itself. 6.9

Just like a spider weaves a web
born forth of its own inner substance,

one sole principle of light
seems to surround itself with an
apparent universe that's made
of its own being, self-become.

To it, each one of us may turn,
from compromise with outward show,
to find all separateness dissolved
in unobscured reality. 6.10

This single principle of light,
pervading all the universe,
is hidden in all beings: as
the inner self in everyone.

It oversees all seeming acts:
as that which lives in everything,
observing all experiences,
itself completely unattached
to any kind of changing act.

Through all perceived appearances
of changing world, it is the witness:
unconditioned, absolute. 6.11

It's that one principle of
activating will, among the many
that aren't active in themselves.

And it's the underlying base
on which one seed of all creation
is made manifold, thus
giving rise to the variety
of things that happen in the world.

Whoever sees it standing here
through all experiences, as one's
own self, finds lasting happiness:

which can't be found in alien things
that are not realized as self. 6.12

It's the unchanging constancy
of constant things, the knowing core
of consciousness in conscious things,

the one reality among
the many seeming things of world,

the central principle of value
from which all desires arise.

And it's the underlying cause
of all phenomena: approached
through analytic reasoning,
or through techniques and disciplines
that harness energy and power. 6.13

The sun does not shine here, nor do
the moon and stars, nor lightning from
the sky, nor any alien fire.

It shines alone, by its own light.
Its very being is to shine.

All shines reflecting after it.
Whatever in the world appears
reflects its light of consciousness.

Thus all the world is nothing else
but the reflected light of self.

As self illuminates the world,
it just illuminates itself. 6.14

It is the one free spirit in
the midst of a conditioned world.

And it alone is all the fire
of energy that permeates
the changes and the transformations
of the world's conditioning.

Just knowing it takes one beyond
all seeming bonds, to deathlessness.

There is no other way than this. 6.15

It's the originating cause
of everything that's known and done;

the self-caused, knowing ground of learning
and of all conditioned qualities;

where all-destroying time
originates and is destroyed.

It's that which knows the primal field
of everyone's experience.
From that one guiding principle
comes order, meaning, quality.
All things are ruled by it, within.

It is the cause of bondage,
and of liberation from the cyclic
processes of birth and death. 6.16

As deathless consciousness, pervading
everywhere, it is the changeless
witness of all happening.

It stands complete, as Lord and guardian
of this changing universe.

From it, all order and all
regularity originate.

There is no other cause of
ordered regularity, enabling
us to understand the world. 6.17

In all that is perceived or thought
or felt within our changing minds,
it is that inner principle
of self-illuminating light:

which all creation must assume,
from which all learning is brought forth,
and for whose sake what's done takes place. 6.18

It's always peaceful: undivided
into parts, and unaffected
by all action in the world.

It's free of blame, cannot be stained,
the final bridge of deathlessness:
just like a fire burning clean
to leave no smoke or ash behind. 6.19

When humankind shall turn all space
back on itself, and shall thus roll
it up, just like an empty skin;

then there shall be an end to grief
for the agnostic about 'God'. 6.20

The highest secret of philosophy,
declared and handed down
from times long past, is not passed on
except to a disciple who
thus finds true clarity and peace. 6.22

Where love for truth transcends all else,
so too does love towards a teacher:

who is living truth itself,
for one to whom the truth is shown.

All meanings that are told and heard
shine forth from unconditioned light
that is each person's real self. 6.23

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