ĪSHVARA

[Everything – well, almost everything you wanted to know about Īshvara (God), but didn't know what to ask, who to ask, and how to ask.]

Introduction

When one looks at oneself, one sees oneself to be an individual living in this world, responding to various objects, situations and people. One also sees an intelligent design throughout the entire creation. There are stars, planets and satellites that function in an orderly manner. The earth moves in its own orbit as even the other planets do. The sun never fails to rise, the oceans never dry up and all the elements function within the framework of physical laws. The various forms of life live in a complex interdependent relationship. A human body, like other life-forms, is made up of many components, each having a distinct function.

Every organ and cell in the body seems lo have a definite purpose. There is nothing that is redundant in this vast creation. The exquisite order and beauty of the creation indicates the presence of a cause which is intelligent.

Īshvara –Intelligent Cause as Well as Material Cause

The creation of any object, such as a pot, involves a twofold cause:

- One is the creator, the pot-maker, who has the knowledge and the skill to make the pot.
- The other is the material from which the pot is made; for example, clay.

In Sanskrit, the intelligent cause is called *nimitta-kārana* and the material cause is called *upādāna-kārana.*

The creation, being intelligently put together, must also have an intelligent cause. Just as the creator of an object must have the knowledge of his creation, so too, the creator of the world must have knowledge of his entire creation. Therefore, omniscience, all knowledge, must reside with the creator. The creation must also have a material cause, the material from which it is made.

Here the question arises as to whether the material exists apart from the creator. In the case of the clay pot, the material, the clay, exists apart from the pot-maker who uses the clay to create the clay pot. In the case of the creation, however, one is unable to assume that the material cause is separate from the intelligent cause. If the intelligent cause were separate from its material cause, the intelligent cause would have to exist outside the creation. Since outside and inside are concepts used in reference to space, and space itself is part of creation, nothing can exist apart from the creation. Therefore, the intelligent cause can only be non-separate from the creation.

Furthermore, if the intelligent cause were separate from the creation, another question would arise as to where the material cause for the creation came from. If one presumed the existence of another material cause for the creation, the question would arise as to the source of that material. This would lead to the fallacy of infinite regression, because the source of the first material cause would rest in another material cause, whose source would rest in another material cause, and so on, leading to a lack of definiteness in conclusion.

There is a finality of perception, however, because one does see a creation. Seeing the creation, one must account for its material cause. Therefore, one can only infer that the material cause of the creation cannot be separate from the intelligent cause.

Examples of both the intelligent and material causes resting in one entity are not unknown in one's experience.

For example, when one dreams, one creates an entire dream world. The dreamer is the intelligent cause of the dream. The material cause from which the various objects in the dream are made is not separate from the dreamer. It is the thoughts and memories of the dreamer which make up the dream. Another example is a spider that spins a web. The spider has the knowledge of how to make the web and finds the material to do so within himself.

The one, who is thus both the intelligent and the material cause for the whole creation, is known as **Īshvara**, the Lord.

Īshvara -- He or She?

One generally uses the pronoun 'He' for Īshvara. This is only a convention and does not imply that Īshvara has a gender.

In the creation one sees both the masculine and the feminine genders. A gender indicates functional and anatomical differences between living organisms. Gender differences do not extend beyond these differences. There is no male eye, female hunger, or neuter sadness. Looking at the world comprising all three genders, one cannot attribute only one gender to Īshvara. One can only say that Īshvara is not male, female, or neuter; or one can say that Īshvara is male, female, and neuter, being the cause of everything.

The intelligent aspect of Īshvara is called *purusha,* which is masculine and the material aspect is called *prakṛti* or *māyā* which is feminine. This combination of the male and the female aspects in Īshvara is represented in the form of the deity called *Ardhanārīshvara,* which is half male and half female.

Īshvara as Ardhnārīshvara

Where is Īshvara?

One does not encounter Īshvara as a resident of any particular place. Were he a resident of a particular place in the creation, a question would arise as to where he was before the creation of the universe. Let one assume that Īshvara is an individual entity living in a particular place that is not available for one's immediate perception, for example, heaven. If this were so, where was he before he created heaven? Saying that he lived in another heaven or hell leads to the same problem of infinite regression.

Looking at the example of the dream, if one were to ask where in the dream world the dreamer is located, one would see that, with respect to the dream world, the dreamer is everywhere in it. The dream mountains, dream rivers, dream animals and dream people are not separate from the dreamer. The dreamer pervades the dream. In other words, the dreamer is immanent in the dream. Similarly, if Īshvara is the intelligent and material cause of the creation, he is immanent in the creation; there is nothing in the creation that is apart from Īshvara. This is what is meant when one says that Īshvara is all pervasive or omnipresent.

Even though the dreamer pervades the dream, the dreamer is not the dream. It is the dream world that resolves into the dreamer. In other words, the dreamer is the one who pervades the dream and, at the same time, transcends it. In the same manner, Īshvara pervades the creation and transcends it.

Therefore, to find Īshvara one does not need to look for a distinct individual being because the creation does not exist apart from Īshvara. **In fact, the creation is nothing but Īshvara.**

ĪSHVARA AS THE ELEMENTS

In Sanskrit, the creation is known as *vishva* which means *"vividha-pratyaya-gamyam"* - that which consists of many and varied forms. The Vedas reduce all of these forms to five constituent elements, called the *panhca-mahābhūtas,* five great elements. They are:

- **Ākāsha**, space;
- **Vāyu,** air;
- **Agni**, fire;
- **Āpah**, water; and
- **Prthivī**, earth.

In this five-elemental model of the creation, the creation is seen as nothing but these five great elements which have undergone a process of grossification. These elements arc thus present in every object in varying degrees. For example, a living object occupies space; is composed of air, water and earth; and contains fire, in the form of temperature. Even inanimate objects, such as water, have the qualities of five great elements. Water occupies space; is composed of air, in the form of hydrogen and oxygen molecules; contains fire, in the form of temperature; and contains earth, in the form of minerals and organic elements.

As the creation is non-separate from Īshvara, the five great elements that comprise the creation are, often, worshipped as Īshvara. For example, in the following five temples in India, Īshvara is invoked in each of the five elements:

- Chidambaram
- Kalahasti
- Tiruvannamalai
- Tirucchirapalli, and
- Kanchipuram.

TRIMŪRTI – THE THREE FORMS OF ĪSHVARA

In the Vedic vision, the Lord is both the intelligent and the material cause of the creation. He is appreciated in the form of various laws and functions as the *trimūrti*. Masculine and feminine aspects of the creation are represented in this vision by denoting the intelligent cause as masculine and the material cause as feminine.

Creation and destruction go together like the two sides of a coin. One cannot exist without the other. In fact, the creation of one object necessarily involves the destruction of another. For example, the creation of a pot-form from a lump of clay involves the destruction of the lump-form. And, between creation and destruction, sustenance of the created object is inevitable. Even though these functions are interdependent, for the sake of worship, the Lord is invoked through each function independently.

From the standpoint of the created universe, the Lord is conceived as having a threefold form, corresponding to three simultaneous functions:

- Creation;
- Sustenance; and
- Destruction.

He is looked upon as the deities **Brahmā**, **Vishnu**, and **Rudra** respectively, representing the intelligent aspect of each function. The consorts for these deities are: **Sarasvatī**, **Lakshmī**, and **Pārvatī**, respectively. These consorts represent the material aspect of each function.

The Individual Deities

Brahmā

Lord Brahmā

Brahmā is the creator. The word *'Brahmā'* derives from the verbal root *'brhi'* meaning 'to grow'. The derivation of the word is *"brimhati, vardhayati yah sah brahmā"* - Brahmā is one who causes growth.

In the Purānas, Brahmā is depicted as having four heads. These are said to represent the four directions or the four Vedas. Brahmā is said to have been born from the navel of Lord Vishnu at the beginning of the creation.

Sarasvatī

Devi Sarasvatī

Creation is possible only when one has knowledge of that which is to be created. Brahma, being the creator, is wedded to knowledge. His consort, Sarasvatī, represents all forms of knowledge. The word 'Sarasvatī' means *"saro nīram, jnānam vā, tadvat, raso vā tasyāh iti"* -- one who possesses water or knowledge, or one who is the essence of everything.

Sarasvatī is depicted in white, holding vīnā in one hand and the Vedas in the other. The color white represents purity. Knowledge is pure when it is unsullied by doubts, errors, or vagueness. The vīnā represents the fine and performing arts. The Vedas represent all scriptural knowledge.

Vishnu

Lord Vishnu

Lord Vishnu is the sustainer of creation. The word 'Vishnu' means *"vyāpnoti vishvam yah"* -the one who pervades the world. In the process of sustaining the creation, Vishnu also preserves and pervades the creation. He is also the preserver of dharma. The Purānas describe how Lord Vishnu manifests in the world to preserve dharma, when unrighteousness becomes rampant. These manifestations of Lord Vishnu (avatāras) that the purānas describe, include:

- *Matsya,* fish;
- *Kūrma,* tortoise;
- *Varāha,* boar;
- *Narasimha,* lion-man;
- *Vāmana,* dwarf; and
- *Parasurāma,*
- *Rāma,*
- *Krishna, and*
- *Kalki.*

Kalki, the last *avatāra,* is yet to manifest.

Lord Vishnu is depicted in a reclining posture asleep on the serpent *Adishesa.* In this posture, he represents the creation in un-manifest form. The coiled serpent, Adishesa, symbolizes the latent power of creation. When the creation is to become manifest, Brahma arises from Vishnu and begins the process of creation.

Lakshmī

Devi Lakshmī

Lakshmī, the consort of Lord Vishnu, represents wealth and prosperity, the sustaining power of creation. She is ornamented in gold and jewels. The word 'Lakshmī' means *"lakshayati pashyati udyoginam iti"* -- the one who can be obtained with diligence and perseverance.

Lakshmī is manifest in many different forms. The eight forms of Lakshmī that are commonly worshipped are:

- *Dhanalakshmī* in the form of wealth;
- *Dhanyalakshmī* in the form of grains and crops;
- *Dhairyalakshmī* in the form of courage;
- *Viryalakshmī* in the form of valor;
- *Vijayalakshmī* in the form of success;
- *Gajalakshmī* in the form of sovereignty;
- *Saubhāgyalakshmī* in the form of good fortune; and
- *Vidyālakshmī* in the form of knowledge.

Rudra or Shiva

Rudra as Lord Shiva

Rudra is a form of Lord *Shiva.* The word 'Rudra' means

"sarva-samhārakah" - the one who destroys everything. With reference to the creation, Rudra is depicted as the deity of destruction. Lord Shiva also has other manifestations. In one form, he is depicted as sitting in meditation. He meditates upon himself as the Lord. He is also depicted as Lord Dakshinā-murti, the first teacher of self-knowledge. In this form, he destroys ignorance of the Self and helps one gain freedom.

Pārvatī

To destroy, one needs power and strength. Lord Shiva's consort, Pārvatī, represents strength. This is why she is also called *Shakti*, which means strength. The Purānas describe Shiva and Pārvatī as residing in the mountains of Kailāsha. The word 'Pārvat' is derived as *"parvatānām adhishthātri devi"* - the one who is the presiding deity of the mountains, or *"parvato himāchalas-tasya apatyam"* -- the one who is the daughter of (the deity of) the Himālaya mountains.

ISHTA DEVATĀS
(Deity Of Choice)

Īshvara, the Lord, is worshipped from the stand-point of different laws and functions in the form of various deities. As the laws and the functions are countless, Īshvara can be worshipped in countless forms. There are, however, some traditional forms for worshipping Īshvara which have evolved through the centuries. These deities include:

- Ganesha,
- Shiva,
- Rāma,
- Krishna,
- Durgā,
- Lakshmī, and
- Dakshināmurti.

The deity chosen for worship by an individual based upon his disposition and liking, is known as ***ishta-devatā***. For instance, one who cannot but express one's devotion by singing and dancing may choose Lord Krishna for worship, while a person with a quiet disposition inclined to spiritual learning may choose Lord Dakshināmurti.

One's own choice can also be determined by a family tradition of worshipping a particular deity. This deity then becomes the *kula-devatā,* the family deity, whose worship is handed down through generations. Sometimes a whole village together worships a particular deity known as the *grāma-devatā,* who also serves as the presiding deity of the village.

One worships the chosen deity, or deities, as the Lord. Most people have an altar for worship, having many gods and goddesses in the form of icons and pictures. One may have his or her primary deity in the centre of the altar and place the other deities around the primary deity.

In the *itihasas* and the purānas, there are different stories told about the various deities. Each deity is depicted with a different form. This form is based on cither symbolic representation of the functions the deity represents, or on the mythological stories surrounding its manifestation. A person chooses the form that is most pleasing and cultivates a special relationship with that deity. Some of the popular forms of ishta-devatas are discussed below.

Lord Ganesha

Lord Ganesha is depicted with a form having the body of a human and the head of an elephant. In the mythology, he is the son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Pārvatī. The word 'Ganesha' in Sanskrit means Lord of all beings. Some of his other names are **Gajanana,** one who has the face of an elephant; and **Vighneshvara,** the Lord who removes all obstacles.

Ganesh, the remover of obstacles

Ganesha is also considered to be the Lord of wisdom. Ganesha has a large forehead which stands for the intellect.

His large ears symbolize the importance of listening and learning. The trunk symbolizes the discriminative capacity because it is strong enough to carry out heavy tasks, like carrying or uprooting a tree, and at the same time sensitive enough to pick up tiny objects from the ground.

It is important for the intellect to have the capacity for discrimination with regard to the finer issues as well as the bigger issues that one encounters. His large belly represents the presence of the whole universe within him. His form also represents curiosity and memory, two qualities associated with the elephant. Thus the whole form symbolizes listening, discrimination, curiosity, and memory, all of which are necessary for one to acquire knowledge and wisdom.

When an idol or a picture of Ganesha is not available for worship, he is invoked in a lump of turmeric or a betel nut. Once invoked, the form is looked upon as a deity until the worship is over.

A puja to any deity is begun only after one performs a puja to Lord Ganesha, as he is the remover of all obstacles. One prays to him for the successful completion of the puja. He is also worshipped on the day of Ganesha-chaturthi, which falls on the fourth day of the bright half of the lunar month of *Bhadrapada* (August-September).

Shivalinga

Īshvara as Lord Shiva is generally worshipped in a particular form known as *linga*. The word 'linga' in Sanskrit means a symbol. The derivation of the word is *"lingyate budhyate. anena iti liigam"* - that by which (something) is represented or known is linga.

The linga is a form which has no particular form. If all forms in the creation were put together that would form an indefinable form which is symbolized by the linga. Since all forms are Īshvara and Īshvara is not any one form, the linga represents the formless form of Īshvara.

It is believed that a highly symbolic and esoteric philosophy emerged with the advent of *Tantra-yoga,* addressing masculine and feminine principles in the creation. During this time, the shivalinga came to be looked upon by some people as representing the union of masculine and feminine aspects symbolized as a phallus. However, there is no known reference of such a meaning in the Vedas.

Lord Shiva is the deity for those desirous of gaining moksha, liberation. Shiva is commonly worshipped on Mondays. People in North India generally worship Lord Siva by chanting *Shivamahimna-stotra.* Lord Shiva is also worshipped on the day and night of *Shivarātri,* a festival which occurs during the month of *Phālguna* (February - March). Shivarātri is an important day of prayer and fasting for spiritual seekers.

Sāligrāma

Lord Vishnu is the sustainer of creation. He is invoked in a *sāligrāma,* which is a type of stone obtained from the River *Gandaki* in Nepal. Sāligrāma is also the name of a sacred place of pilgrimage in the Himalayan ranges where the River Gandaki originates.

This stone contains marks of the *chakra* (disc), a weapon Lord Vishnu holds in his hand; it gains its importance from its association with Lord Vishnu as told in the purānic stories, There are nineteen different types of sāligrāmas.

Lord Vishnu is commonly worshipped on the day of *Vaikuntha-ekadashi,* which falls in the month of *Mārgashira* (November-December) and during *Satyānārayana-pūjā,* which is performed on the full moon day every month.

Rāma and Krishna

Lord Rāma

Lord Krishna

Lord Vishnu is also worshipped in the form of his incarnations, such as Lord Rāma and Lord Krishna. They are looked upon them as *avataras,* incarnations of Īshvara. Īshvara does not exist apart from the creation and has the capacity to manifest in the creation in any particular form. It is believed that this manifestation happens as a result of people's prayers during the times when unrighteousness prevails. An avatāra (incarnation) reestablishes dharma, thus blessing humanity. Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (4.7):

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत।
अभ्युत्थानम् अधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम्।।

Yadā yadā hi dharmasya
gldnirbhavatī bhārata
Abhyuthānam adharmasya
tadātmānam srijāmyaham.

O Arjuna, whenever there is a decline in righteous living, and an increase in wrong living everywhere, I bring myself into being (assume a physical body."

Invoking and worshipping Īshvara in various forms, animate and inanimate, is unique to the Vedic culture. These symbolisms are abstract and are based upon an understanding and vision of the Lord.

Pārvatī, Lakshmī, and Sarasvatī

Goddesses Pārvati, Lakshmī, and Sarasvatī are worshipped during Nauarāatri or Dasharā which is celebrated in the month of *Ashvina* (September - October). This festival lasts for nine days. Pārvatī, in the form of Durgā, is worshipped during the first three days. In this form she is said to have destroyed the demon Mahisāsura (buffalo-demon). During the next three days, Goddess Lakshmī is worshipped by those who seek prosperity and wealth. Lakshmī is also worshipped during Dipāvali (Diw ali) festival.

During the last three days *of* Navarātri Goddess Sarasvatī is worshipped. On the ninth day an altar is made of books, instruments of fine and performing arts and implements of various professions, all of which represent knowledge and skills. At this altar Goddess Sarasvatī is invoked and worshipped.

Other Forms of Worship

The Lord is worshipped in many other forms, including the cow, the elephant, the trees, and the rivers. These forms serve as vehicles for invoking Īshvara due to their importance in the lives of the people, their associations with the various deities in the purānas, and their symbolic representations. Worship of Īshvara in many forms reflects an appreciation of the knowledge that the world does not exist apart from Īshvara.

Extracted, adapted, and reprinted with permission from Purna Vidya – Vedic Heritage Teaching Programme, Part 7 – Sanātana Dharma, p. 3-5, 8-9, 12-13, 17-21. Published by Sri Ganga dhareswar Trust, Swami Dayanand Ashram Purani Jhadi, Rishikesh, India, 1993. (Arsh Vidya Guru-kulam, P. O. Box 1059, Saylors-burg, PA 18353; www. arshvidya.org.

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Be more concerned with your character than your reputation.
Your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.