

Chapter 1



THE ISHAVASYA UPANISHAT

An Ode to Trusteeship

One should aspire to live for a hundred years discharging one's assigned responsibilities. Such a person will never be tainted by the consequences of his deeds.

– Ishavasya Upanishat, Verse 2

Presented here is a summary of teachings enumerated in Ishavasya Upanishat, a short scripture comprising 20 hymns. The central concept of this Upanishat is 'trusteeship'. This is clear from the context in which this Upanishat was revealed to the sage Swayambhuva Manu who is entrusted with the affairs of the universe for a specified sub-cycle called the *Manvantara* (duration of a Manu, or his life span). While time is infinite, creation, existence and destruction of the universe occurs in cycles called *kalpa* which has a duration of 311.04 trillion years. A sub-cycle of a kalpa lasts for about 306.72 million years.

It is said that Manu was attacked by demons with the intention to disrupt the functioning of the universe. So, Manu began praying to the Lord Almighty to help him discharge his responsibilities of conducting the affairs of the

universe. It is at this time that this Upanishat was revealed to Manu. Consequently, the issues covered in it deal with the concept and various facets of trusteeship. It must be noted that the teachings of this Upanishat apply to all trustees, with Manu setting an example. The context of demons attacking Manu is akin to worldly challenges faced by trustees in the real world – to help overcome them and enable the trustees to discharge their responsibilities.

Concept of trusteeship

Q: What is meant by trusteeship, and who is called a trustee?

A: Anyone who has been entrusted with the responsibility of managing the affairs of an entity (trusteeship) is a 'trustee'. The emphasis is on the word 'trust'. The world is based on trust. If people do not trust each other, then life cannot progress. A trustee could be the head of a family, an organisation, or even a country. Trustees typically have control of and access to resources to discharge their duties. For example, the president of a country has vast powers to levy and collect taxes. At the same time, trustees have to be cautious in utilising the resources at their command in faithful discharge of their duties. History is full of examples of failed leaders who did not live up to the trust reposed in them. In this Upanishat, Manu is a trustee since he was entrusted with the responsibility of running the affairs of the universe during the stipulated period.

Q: What are the challenges faced by a trustee and how do these originate?

A: Trustees, whether they are heads of corporations or heads

of governments, inherently face challenges in ensuring that they do not fall prey to worldly temptations. They typically have access to vast resources and have broad freedom in utilising these resources. They have to exercise the same care in using these resources as they would with their personal funds. While society has devised checks and balances in the form of audits, etc., by definition a certain amount of freedom has to be accorded to trustees to enable them to discharge their duties. It is a question of how well – or how poorly – they use this freedom.

Q: How can a trustee meet these challenges?

A: Ishavasya Upanishat addresses the issue of challenges faced by trustees by exhorting them (and the rest of us) to realise that every resource in the universe is a property of the Lord Almighty, and trustees have temporary custody of these resources only to enable them to perform their duties. The Lord Almighty is present in the entire universe and is a witness to any and all acts performed by everyone. When a trustee realises this truth, a sense of responsibility and urgency is instilled in him, which enables the trustee to manage the resources with caution. Once he knows that the true owner of all resources is the Lord Almighty, a trustee can sever any attachment to the resources he commands. He then develops the conviction that he has to dispense and be accountable for what the Lord Almighty provides. He does not actively seek wealth or power from others.

Q: If the Lord Almighty is omnipresent, why can't we see Him?

A: It is not necessary for one to see something to realise its presence. For example, if we look at a glass of water, we cannot

determine whether the water inside is fresh water or salt water simply by viewing it. However, when one tastes the water, one can arrive at a definite conclusion. By this analogy, the Lord has to be experienced and need not be seen to acknowledge His presence.

Qualifications and responsibilities of a trustee

Q: What are the pre-requisites to qualify as a trustee?

A: The essential qualifications of a trustee are:

- Work ethics.
- Detachment from rewards of labour.
- Enthusiasm in discharging responsibilities.
- Trust and faith in the Lord Almighty.
- Desire to live a full life devoted to discharging responsibilities.
- Effective knowledge management.

Concept of a 'full life': It is said that a trustee should aspire to lead a full life (nominally indicated as 100 years) while discharging his responsibilities, without any expectations of the outcome. It is interesting to note that according to scriptures, the life span of human beings is calibrated in terms of the total number of breathing cycles, with 777.6 million as the maximum number of breaths. Based on an optimum duration of 4 seconds for a cycle of one breath (inhalation + exhalation), the maximum of 777.6 million breaths correspond to a duration of 100 years (at the rate of 4 seconds for a cycle of breathing, there will be 15 cycles in a minute, 900 cycles in an hour, 21,600 cycles in a day, 6,48,000 in a month and 7.776 million cycles in a year).

This leads to some interesting observations. Anyone breathing much faster than the 4-second cycle is susceptible to a reduced life span, which is readily observed with those leading highly stressful lives which manifests as faster breathing most of the times. As a corollary, it is noted that those who make it a habit to take much longer breathing cycles, can actually increase their life span beyond 100 years! Such is the case with accomplished yogis who have perfected the art of breath control and manage a more relaxed and contented life.

Q: How does a trustee deal with the issue of knowledge management?

A: Knowledge is a very important tool required of a trustee to enable successful implementation of responsibilities. A trustee has an obligation to acquire the right type of knowledge to help him conduct day-to-day affairs. It is equally important for a trustee to recognise wrong knowledge and prevent the spread of such knowledge that can cause damage to society. Scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita provide a detailed account of the types of knowledge and knowledge management. It is important for a trustee to acquire true knowledge about the Lord.

Knowledge itself is of three kinds. The ‘right knowledge’ about the Lord and the universe leads to salvation, ‘wrong knowledge’ leads to eternal damnation, and ‘absence of knowledge’ leads nowhere. Right knowledge includes knowledge about the infinite, auspicious attributes of the Lord, reality of the universe, and the five-fold differences among the triumvirate that make up the universe – the Lord, individual souls, and inert objects.