

The Upanishadic Path to Ecological Responsibility and Sustainable Future

The opening verse of the *Isha Upanishad* (one of the eight *Upanishads*, which comprise the earliest Indian philosophical literature) is a proposition so profound that later commentators, from Adi Shankaracharya to Sri Aurobindo, have construed it as the essence of the text's entire philosophy:

ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्यस्विद्धनम् ॥

"All this, whatsoever moves in this moving world, is enveloped by the Lord. Enjoy through renunciation; do not covet anyone's wealth."

This middle path, formulated three millennia ago, is what a resource-depleted planet needs present and future generations to adopt and follow.

Decoding and Understanding this Verse in the Context of Environment

The first word, *Ishavasyam*, i.e., pervaded, indwelt, enveloped by the Lord, situated within the overarching Upanishadic framework of the self (*atman*) and the supreme (*brahman*), teaches that one should partake of what is available with restraint and non-possessiveness and should not covet what belongs to another. It states that enjoyment (*bhunjitha*) be mediated by renunciation (*tyaktena*) and disciplined by the refusal to covet (*ma gridhah*). In the precise interpretation of *tena tyaktena bhunjitha*, *tyaga* signifies renunciation or detachment while *bhunjitha* carries the sense of enjoying, using or possessing.

If forests, rivers, flora and fauna and the atmosphere are not simply resources awaiting human appropriation but are themselves suffused with the sacred or the divine, then their extraction becomes a matter of restraint and reverence.

This sentiment is not unique to the *Ishopanishad* within the Vedic corpus. Consider this phrase from Atharvaveda's *Bhumi Sukta* (12.12):

माता भूमिः पुत्रोऽहं पृथिव्याः

"Earth is my mother; I am the son of Earth."

Articulated in the first-person pronoun, it may be taken to imply that all inhabitants of the Earth are her sons, and they all have a right on her as well as a responsibility toward her. This reinforces the belief that she belongs to all rather than any single claimant.

Ancient Dictum, Contemporary Relevance

Perceived in the wake of the ecological crisis of the 21st century, the *Ishopanishadic* hymn acquires an



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extraordinary contemporary resonance: use without abusing, harassing or exploiting; enjoy without exhausting and possess without becoming possessed by possession itself.

Sadly, this is the era of manufacture, extract, consume and discard. A light left burning in an empty room, water flowing unnecessarily from a tap, tissue paper pulled out in quantities greater than required, food discarded because more was served than could be eaten, a perfectly usable object replaced merely because a newer version has appeared - these may seem trivial in isolation. Collectively, however, such tendencies or habits express a deeper cultural disposition that nature's resources exist for immediate human consumption and abundance equals unlimited availability.

The *Ishopanishadic* ethic challenges this assumption. *Ma gridhah* (do not covet) is a caution against the psychology of endless acquisition. The environmental problem is not consumption as such. Human beings necessarily consume food, water, energy, materials and space. The question is: how much, for what purpose, at what ecological cost and with what consequences for others and those who will be born after us?

Great Minds Drawing from Tena Tyaktena Bhunjitha

Mahatma Gandhi gave this ancient morale a distinctly modern economic vocabulary. His popular observation that the Earth provides enough for everyone's needs, but not for everyone's greed, has become a touchstone of environmental thought. In *Trusteeship* (compiled by Ravindra Kelekar and published in 1960), he argued that taking more than one needs amounts to depriving others. His notion of non-possession, therefore, had a social as well as an ecological dimension: restraint in consumption creates room for equity, justice and human dignity.

Gandhi's thinking is particularly relevant to environmental behaviour today because it makes the question of sustainability a question of responsibility. Turning off an appliance when it is unneces-

sary, closing a tap while brushing, carrying a reusable bottle, avoiding needless printing, using both sides of paper, taking only as much food as one can eat, repairing rather than immediately replacing usable goods, refusing unnecessary single-use articles, segregating waste, composting organic matter, planting and caring for native trees, protecting local water bodies and avoiding litter are not insignificant gestures. They cultivate *sanyam* (self-restraint) and can transform an abstract environmental ethic into daily conduct and practice.

The Gandhian economist J. C. Kumarappa developed this insight into an economic philosophy in *The Economy of Permanence* (1945). He distinguished between exhaustible resources, such as fossil fuels and minerals, and renewable flows, such as water and growing timber, whose continued availability depends upon responsible management. His central proposition was that an economy should not merely maximise present consumption but should harmonise human activity with nature's capacity for renewal.

Kumarappa's postulate offers a bridge between Indian civilisational thought and contemporary sustainability. Nature, in his conception, is not an inert warehouse of raw materials. It is an organic and symbiotic whole of relationships in which different elements sustain one another. He cautions that an economy that destroys its ecological foundations may generate wealth and steer towards advancement and development in the short term, but it jeopardises its own existence in the long term.

Conclusion

Moderation, restraint and a control over endless consumption can inform, guide and motivate present and future generations in environmental protection, preservation, conservation and restoration ethics.

Ecological responsibility cannot be left entirely to governments, courts or institutions like the NGT. We are all equal stakeholders in the country's growth. A river is also the responsibility of the community that lives beside it; a neighbourhood tree is also the responsibility of the citizens who benefit from its shade; a local pond, forest, grazing ground or wetland survives only when people recognise a stake in its continued existence. Let's move from "use-and-discard" to "use-and-care"; from extraction to regeneration; from ownership to stewardship; from entitlement to responsibility.

Bharat's growth story need not be imagined as a choice between progress and prosperity vis-à-vis ecology. Forests must remain forests even as economies grow; rivers must remain living rivers even as cities expand; soil must remain fertile even as agriculture becomes more productive; biodiversity must flourish even as infrastructure develops. This will be possible once we all think and act along *tena tyaktena bhunjitha*.

Fable with Moral

Shakuntala and Dushyant

(Abhijnanashakuntalam by Kalidasa)



Shakuntala lived in rishi Kanva's hermitage, living a simple, idyllic life. King Dushyanta of Hastinapur encountered her while hunting and was captivated by her beauty. He remained near the hermitage, and mutual affection grew. Though raised in modesty and restraint, Shakuntala felt deep emotion for him. They acknowledged their love and married informally, without traditional ceremonies.

Dushyanta was called away on royal duties. He gave Shakuntala his ring as a token of love and promised to send for her. While lost in thoughts of him, she inadvertently offended the short-tempered sage Durvasa, by failing to notice his arrival and neglecting to offer him traditional hospitality. He cursed her: the person she longs for will forget her. At her friends' pleading, he softened the curse so it would lift when Dushyanta sees the ring.

Pregnant with her child, Shakuntala left the hermitage amid deep sorrow

at parting from her childhood home. At Dushyanta's court the curse took effect: he failed to recognize her accusing her of deception. She reached for the ring only to realize she had lost it while worshipping in the Ganges. Heartbroken, she was taken by celestial nymphs to the ashram of her divine mother, Menaka.

The ring was later recovered from a fisherman who found it in a fish's belly. When it was shown to Dushyanta, the curse broke and his memory returned. Filled with remorse, he yearned to reunite with her. After fulfilling a mission for Indra against demons, he met Shakuntala on a heavenly mountain with their son Bharata, a remarkable child of courage and strength whose royal birthmarks confirmed his legitimacy. Dushyanta falls at her feet in apology. After initial hesitation, Shakuntala accepts his sincerity; destiny reunites them, restoring her honor.

Moral of the Fable - God does Justice

Did you know?

The Western Ghats across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka hide a spectacular botanical wonder. The *Neelakurinji* (*Strobilanthes kunthiana*) shrub blooms just once every twelve years. When thousands of these shrubs blossom simultaneously, entire mountain slopes transform into a breathtaking, vibrant purplish-blue carpet. This extraordinary natural phenomenon gave the Nilgiri hills their very name, which translates directly to the Blue Mountains.

Botanists refer to this rare survival strategy as mass synchronized flowering. By blooming together after a long gap, the plants produce more seeds than local wildlife can possibly consume, ensuring the species survives. The unique lifecycle of this wildflower acts as a crucial



ecological calendar for indigenous communities like the Toda tribe, who historically tracked their age using these magnificent mass blooms.

During these rare peak bloom cycles, seeing the high-altitude shola-grassland hillsides of Munnar covered in vivid purple remains one of nature's most enchanting spectacles, drawing travelers worldwide to key eco-tourism spots like Eravikulam National Park, Meeshapulimala, Chokramudi, Sevenmalai and Gundumala.

QUIZ Environment & Sustainability

Questions	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
1 For over 200 years, tribal farmers in Meghalaya have used pipes to divert water from springs through steep hillsides without causing soil erosion or water wastage, ensuring agricultural resilience. What is this practice called?	Bamboo drip irrigation	Khadin system	Zabo system	Drip/Micro irrigation
2 The 'Bhunga' houses withstood one of the most devastating earthquakes of 21st century. Where are they found?	Kashmir	Gujarat	Andaman	Assam
3 Which animal's behaviour is often treated as an early warning sign for approaching cyclones for the indigenous communities of coastal Odisha?	Spotted Deer	Flying Fox	Red Crab	Sea Turtle
4 Which ecological feature acts as a 'bio-shield', often supported by coastal management to reduce tsunami impact?	Mangrove forests	Coral reefs	Sand dunes	Kelp belts
5 In the context of community resilience, what is the primary purpose of 'Village Grain Banks' found in many tribal regions of India?	Fair price shops	Export surplus storage	Grain quality testing	Post-disaster food security

Answers: 1 - A, 2 - B, 3 - C, 4 - A, 5 - D

Varanasi Jataka

1

A loyal gardener looked after a beautiful garden of a wealthy merchant in the town of Varanasi.

2

One day the gardener's friend dropped by to invite him to a festival in a nearby town.

3

The monkey was tempted to go but wondered who would water the garden in his absence. A monkey living on a tree saw the gardener looking sad and asked him the reason behind his sadness.

4

The monkey offered to help the gardener in watering the plants in his absence. The gardener was happy and proceeded to visit the nearby town and enjoy the festival.

5

The monkey rounded up his friends and instructed them to collect watering cans and buckets.

6

Soon the monkeys were faced with a problem. They found that some plants were big and others were small. They asked the monkey how much water should they give to each plant. The monkey instructed them to give water according to the size of the roots.

7

Following orders blindly without common sense, they pulled up each tree to check the size of its roots—giving lots of water to deep roots and little to shallow roots—thereby killing the entire garden.

8

Two days later when the gardener returned, he was aghast at the site of his destroyed garden. He bowed his head down in despair and worried about what to say to his master, the wealthy merchant.

MORAL OF THE STORY: Ignorance and foolish actions do more harm than good, even when motivated by good intentions.