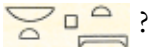


THE EGYPTIAN MYSTERIES: ISIS

Arthur Versluis, Ph.D.

Extracted from *The Egyptian Mysteries*, by Arthur Versluis; first published by Penguin. Copyright © Arthur Versluis 1988

Drawing upon Vedic, Buddhist, Greek, Roman, and Hermetic texts, the author examines the place of Isis in the ancient Egyptian Mystery tradition—in many respects the origin of Western tradition—not as an isolated phenomenon, but in the light of the great traditions still in existence. By setting the Mystery tradition in the context of the primordial tradition, its relation to our present era begins to emerge. To understand the modern world and our place in the cosmos, it is necessary to understand the Mysteries. Arthur Versluis, author of numerous books and articles, serves as Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Michigan State University. He is the founding President of the American Association for the Study of Esotericism, and a leader in the scholarship of Esotericism in North America.

Perhaps no God or Goddess has ever enjoyed the worship and celebration of so many throughout the ancient world, from the earliest times up to and through the time of Christianity, as did Isis. Indeed, even after Isis herself had “vanished” under that name, “She of the Many Names” continued under the guise of the Virgin Mary, Who in turn assumed many of the functions that Isis had served in earlier epochs. Both, like Kanzeon Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism, “hear the cries of the world”—both are the “compassionate deliverers of the world’s suffering.” But who is Isis, the *regina coeli*, Queen of Heaven, whose sign in Egyptian was  ?

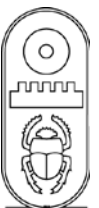
For an answer we turn, first, to the myth of Isis and Rā, found in the Turin Papyrus,¹ in which Isis is seen as blackmailing the poisoned Sun God Rā into revealing his

most secret, sacred Names of Power in return for an antidote. For in this tale we can see the principal Essence of Isis: she is Mediatrix between the Celestial and the terrestrial.



Olga Deulofeu, S.R.C., *Isis*.

In the text in question, Isis is defined as “She Who loved the Gods; She Who was wearied of men; She Who loved best the realm of the spirits.”² In other words, Isis, though necessarily partaking of the highest realms—those of the Gods and of Rā—was none the less most closely affiliated with the mediate subtle realm, the world of spirits (*bhuvah*), the Atmosphere, the Vast Sea in which the temporal world was precipitated like a tiny island. Isis is the Queen of the subtle realm, and therefore in her own way “mistress of the Earth . . . like Rā . . . (and) of like rank and power in Heaven,”³ for she rules the essences of herbs and animals and all sentient things. According to the myth under consideration, Isis hid a dart in Rā’s path, and when he encountered it he fell mortally poisoned, and was revitalised only by divulging to Isis, the Great Sorceress, his True Names. Within



this tale we begin to glimpse the nature of Isis, elucidated by the Qabalistic teaching that each of the Sephiroth, when emanated, “spilled over” into disequilibrium, and were later returned to Divine Order, and that each of the Sephira corresponded to aspects of the Divine Names. For both the Qabala and the tales of Isis refer to the emanation of temporality from the Real, to the essential superstructure of Creation, mediate between “above” and “below.”



Votive relief honoring Isis, Osiris, and Horus, Ptolemaic period (332 – 31 BCE), limestone. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

That Isis, then, should have a mediate place in the Egyptian theogony is only proper, for she, like Egypt herself at that time, lay mediate between the primordial past and the secular, materialist future, between the sacred and the profane. Although in the myth under consideration Rā is depicted as being senile and decrepit, obviously, since Rā cannot in his nature change, it must be something else which is being suggested. In fact, it is not Rā Who becomes senile, but rather man who becomes blind to Rā. In this tale, in other words, we see not the senescence of Rā, but the senescence of Egypt herself, and her blindness to Rā,

a blindness remedied by Isis, who acts as intermediary or bridge between man and the Sun to which he is ever more blind. Isis, in sum, not fundamentally different from the Sun, is rather a manifestation of the Divine Compassion accessible to man in an age of waning faith and wisdom.

Hence Isis said: “I have revealed to mankind mystic initiations. I have taught reverence for the Gods; I have established the temples.”⁴ Now needless to say these are ultimately the actions of the Divine Sun inherent within Creation and within humanity, from whom Isis cannot be separate. However, within a given historical period certain incarnations or manifestations of the Divine are of far more aid than others. They speak to a given age and need, and so it was—and perhaps is—for Isis. As is said in the litany *Praises of Rā*, “Thou art indeed Isis.”⁵ When Isis—or any—bestows blessings upon man, it is Rā who bestows them.⁶

From this we can begin, too, to see the relation of Isis to Nephthys, her sister and consort of Typhon, the latter being a reflection and aspect of Isis, just as Isis is an aspect of Rā. According to Plutarch, Isis is that which is manifest; Nephthys is, or rules, that which is unmanifest.⁷ Nephthys, then, is that of the subtle realm which is unmanifest, which is outside the pale of the temporal realm, whereas Isis is “she of the green wings and the crescent moon” and, while including Nephthys as one aspect of her, nevertheless pertains more the “world below the moon,” the world of generation and of living beings. Nephthys, on the other hand, is the “shade” of Isis; she manifests the residues or traces of the living world, representing decay, dissolution.

The Rising of the Nile

Isis’s sign was Sothis, the dog-star, which signified her power, for that star was associated with the rising of the Nile, and the coming of life anew each year. This

association was reinforced by her companion Hermanubis, the Divine Messenger, who lives between the Divine and the earthly realms, whose dog-head is half black and half gold,⁸ and whose barking separates stranger from friend.⁹ The name “Sothis” derives from a trinity of Gods: *Seth*, or Typhon, the principal power of darkness, ignorance, anger and destruction; Osiris; and his consort, *Isis* herself. In this one star is, then, an intricate glyph of Osiris being overcome by Seth, found by Hermanubis, rescued and restored by Isis, all condensed into its cyclical pattern, marking the heat of summer and the cold depths of winter, the rising and the falling of the Nile: all life.

An even clearer indication of Isis’s nature can be glimpsed from two tales related by Pausanias of men who had dared to profane her temples. In both tales, a profane man, who had no right to enter, burst into the temple out of curiosity: one on his own account, the other on behalf of a Roman governor. Both entered during festival time; both found the shrine filled with spectres. The first returned to Tithorea, where he died; the other returned to the Roman governor,



Wall relief of Isis in east upstairs, temple of Edfu, Egypt. Photo © 2009 Rémi/Wikimedia Commons.

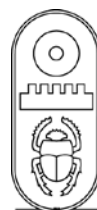
told his tale, and then immediately expired as well. Pausanias thereby concludes that “it is ill for mankind to see the Gods in bodily shape,” echoing Homer.¹⁰ While the tales do not divulge anything of the Mysteries themselves, they do corroborate our observation that Isis’s domain was essentially the subtle realm, the realm of “spectres,” and that sacred Knowledge is self-protecting.

The only remaining account, *in toto*, of that which could be lawfully revealed of the Mysteries, and the Mysteries of Isis in particular, is that of Apuleius in his novel *The Golden Ass*. Although, clearly, we cannot reproduce that tale in its entirety here, despite its worthiness, we can at least distil from it the general characteristics of an initiation, as well as of Isis herself. For from this account we can see quite clearly that even at that late date—even in the second-century-AD Rome of Apuleius—the power of Isis was unabated, immense, able to inspire her worshippers with visions of her splendour, with the inexpressible plenitude and gratitude of reception into the Divine.

Then from the Ocean She Rises...

Apuleius’ account of the Mysteries is to be found in Book XI, beginning when, having been exhausted by his miseries, driven to the very edge of the sea by his troubles and enchantments, “at land’s end,” the hero Lucius immerses himself seven times in the ocean and with tear-stained face turns to the orb of the Full Moon as it emerged from the waves of the sea. In dire straits, bereft of all hope, he addresses Isis, She of the Moon, Queen of Heaven:

“whether you be Ceres, motherly nurse of all growth . . . or celestial Venus, who in the first moment of Creation mingled the sexes in the generation of mutual desires . . . or the sister of Phoebus . . . or Proserpine . . . whose triple face has the power to ward off the assaults of ghosts and to close the cracks in the Earth . . . dispensing your radiance



when the Sun has abandoned us.” (Italics mine)

Then from the ocean she rises, such beauty as words fail to approach: upon her head is a chaplet of flowers in the midst of which is a circlet—a softly glowing moon supported by two vipers that rise from the Earth, near blades of corn. Her garments are many-hued: yellow, white,



Landscape with Temple, ca. first century BCE – first century CE. Roman fresco from the temple of Isis in Pompeii. Museo Archeologico Nazionale (Naples). Photo by Wolfgang Rieger/Wikimedia Commons.

red, while around them falls a softly shining black cape, passing over her left shoulder, a cape spangled with stars, a crescent moon breathing forth from the centre. In her right hand is the triple chord of the sistrum;¹¹ in her left hand a golden boat, above which rises the head of an asp from its sacred coils.

To poor Lucius (whose true nature, by virtue of his name, is light), still entrapped in the body of an ass, she speaks:

“Behold, Lucius—moved by your prayer I come to you—I, the natural mother of all life, mistress of the elements, first child of time, Supreme Divinity, Queen of those in Hell, First of those in Heaven, the manifestation of all the Gods and Goddesses—I, who govern by my nod

the crests of light in the sky, the purifying wafts of the ocean, and the lamentable silences of Hell—I, whose single Godhead is venerated over all the Earth under manifold forms, varying rites, and changing names.”

She admonishes Lucius to “only remember Her,” for by keeping the remembrance “fast in his heart’s deep core” he should, if he remains faithful, after death live on praising Her in the Elysian fields, for “if you are found to merit My love by your dedicated obedience, religious devotion, and constant chastity, you will discover that it is within My power to prolong your life beyond the limits set to it by Fate.”¹²

Solace to the Troubled Human Soul

It is quite certain that we have here not simply a literary account of the Mysteries nor, as with Firmicus Maternus, a bitter diatribe by a Christian against the “pagans,” nor the distanced, impersonal account of Plutarch, but the words of an eyewitness, sympathetic of Isis as She really was, seen through the eyes of Her worshippers. And though Her worshippers were drawn from every class, we have here an account by one of the literati, a scholar, who had found serenity not in the “bitter cross of anxiety,” as the Roman phrase had it, but in the folds of the Great Goddesses’ robes. Here, unmistakably, we have a true religious experience, one which speaks to, gives solace to, the troubled soul of man, for whom neither scholarship nor earthly delights offer any lasting comfort. It is for this reason that Apuleius’ account is so moving.

The account of his initiation builds to a kind of universal climax: the populace throngs into the city as the sun rises—all are jubilant, buoyant as Lucius himself, who knows that his deliverance is imminent. The colourful pageant goes on, women dressed in the white vestures of spring, scattering balm and flowers,

while others bear mirrors upon their backs, walking before the Goddess so that all approach her Image. Musicians play upon their pipes; poets recite; the shaven initiates walk behind in a great band, dressed in purest white, shaking sistras of brass, silver and gold, with the priests in the rear, carrying the Great Lamp and the altars. Behind all follow the Gods themselves: the Messenger of Heaven and Hell, Anubis, face half black and half gold, bearing his rod in his left hand, followed by a Cow, emblem of the Mother of all, and last of all one bearing the sacred symbol of the Supreme Deity, inexpressible, veiled in the Deep Silence of true religion.

A Wealth of Symbols

Throughout Apuleius' account we find a wealth of descriptions of the Mysteries and of sacred symbology: the sistrum with its three chords, for the three worlds; the sacred uraeus, the asps which symbolise the coiled serpent of Sakti entwined around Siva (or of Isis coiled round Osiris); Isis arising from the Great Ocean; the golden barque of Rā, the Sun, in which the dead find life eternal, a kind of immortality; the gooseneck prow of the sacred barque, signifying the unerring homeward path which Isis and Rā represented. Indeed, the list is long, the symbolism intricate.

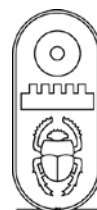
But what of the initiation itself? Of that, Lucius can say little: not because he would not, but because he cannot, not least because the power of the Goddess is to bestow death as well as life, punishment as well as weal—and yet from his tale the essence of the event, the turning, can be inferred; we can see there the immense gratitude and serenity, the joy and universal harmony which it bestows, not only upon him alone, but upon all in the populace, to each according to his need. As Apuleius says: “At midnight the Sun shone in all his full splendour. I could tell you more, but you would not understand.”

The Sun shines at midnight: in this we see the essence of the ‘Black Rite’¹³ of the ancient Egyptians, of the entry into death itself which lies at the heart of the Mysteries—for “initiation is a kind of voluntary death with but the slightest chance of redemption.” Initiation bestows a redemption in the Sun, the Divine Sun which appears in the very depths of human despair, when egoism is transcended, when the world of form, subtle and dense, drops away—then, at midnight, comes that of which nothing more can be said: Divine Plenitude overwhelming.

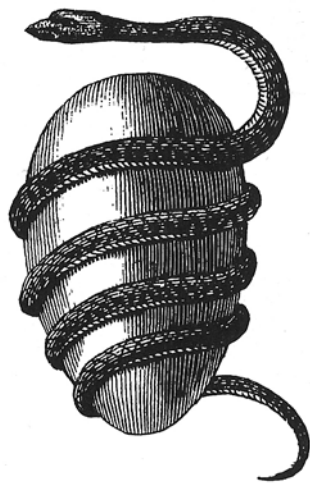
Isis, then, is the principal generative force, associated with the healing herbs and the powers of medicine, with the growth



Shiva, from the Ellora Caves, Maharashtra, India. Photo © 2009 WL Nozomiiqel/Wikimedia Commons.



of wheat and corn (the domestication of which marked the inception of Egypt herself, and delineated the entrance into the present historical epoch), being mediatrix, meeting point as it were of the Gods and the temporal world. Hers is the self-motive power of generation,¹⁴ of which agriculture is the outward manifestation, and of which the green wings and crescent moon are symbol.¹⁵ The root of Her name is closely affiliated with the Egyptian root *pr*, which implies house, or home, suggesting that She is Mistress within



Orphic Egg sketch, from Jacob Bryant, *A New System* (London, 1775). From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

the Houses of the Gods. As Cassiopeia, she reclines head downwards upon the night horizon. One of her names, too, was Isis Pelagia: she of the waves. Hence as Venus she was envisioned as riding above the ocean of temporality. Yet she was also Ge-Meter, or Earth-Mother, which in Greek became Demeter.¹⁶

One of the most suggestive characteristics of Isis, however, is her relation to the coiled serpents or asps with which she is always associated, for the serpent is almost universally a symbol of the vital force, the coiled essence of life itself, rising up the spine to the crown

of the head. This attribution of the life-force to the serpentine form is particularly true within Tantric tradition, in which *kundalini*, the Serpent of Life, who slumbers at the base of the spine, in the realm of generation, is awakened as it rises up the *susumna*, the sacred channel, axis of the body, through the aperture of Brahma, conferring liberation upon the adept.

Although we cannot of course say that Isis is Sakti, nor that Osiris is Siva, the central pole around which the coiled serpent, Sakti, is slumbering, yet none the less the two pairs are incontrovertibly interrelated: it is not, after all, insignificant that the constellation Cassiopeia—She of the Throne, Mulier Sedis—should circle round the Pole with the passage of the year, just as Isis, with whom she is associated, hovered over the slain Osiris to reinvigorate him after his death and dismemberment.

Siva and Sakti

What, then, is the relationship between Siva and Sakti? Essentially, it is that between power (Sakti) and power-holder (Siva), between activity and the quiescent centre. Siva is the power-holder (*saktimān*), and Sakti is the power, the Great Mother of the Universe. Siva is pure consciousness; Sakti is Mind, life, matter. Neither can exist without the other: like Osiris and Isis, they were “joined together in the Womb” as One; they are Divine Reality, from which, when we overlay name and form (*nama* and *rupa*), mind and matter, the cosmos arises. Hence Isis is “She of Many Names,” and so, according to the *Kubrika-tantra*, it is not Brahma, Visnu and Rudra who create, but their *saktis*.¹⁷ Activity is the nature of *prakriti*,¹⁸ for which reason the female is depicted above the male in Tantric representations, just as Isis, in Egyptian iconography, hovered above the prone Osiris.

To continue the Tantric imagery, in the Earth-centre called the *Muladbara-*

cakra, Kundalini Sakti manifests as a serpent coiled round a self-produced phallus (*Svayambhulinga*): indeed, the word “kundali” means “coiled” or *in potentia*, and she is said to produce the phenomenal world by the “veiling” (*maya*) of pure consciousness of herself as Consciousness—“spiralling forth” spontaneously, thereby creating the “Eggs of Brahma” (*Brahmānda*) by turning back upon Herself once, forming a coil or loop.

In Greek symbolism, which derived from the Egyptian, this form was termed the “Orphic Egg.” When she turns back upon herself for a third time, the pyramid shape is said to be formed (*Srngātaka*). Like Isis, She is a “receptacle of that continuous stream of ambrosia which flows from Eternal Bliss”¹⁹(from Brahman through Siva). She, the “world-bewilderer,” is “bright as millions of moons” and “by her in this world-egg (*Brahmānda*) illumined.”²⁰ Like Isis, her symbol is the white lotus which floats upon and arises out of the mire of dense matter, and yet is pure and unsullied.

In brief, we can see from this discussion that there is indeed a direct correspondence between the metaphysics of Tantrism and the symbology of ancient Egypt, and that the former can

shed a great deal of light upon the latter, of which is left, as prophesied, “only carvings in stone,” the merest outward signs. But no doubt the two traditions descended from a common source, in the indefinitely ancient past, perhaps through the Chaldees; certainly in the Near East.

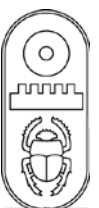
Regardless of their apparent differences, the two traditions are virtually identical in symbology, correspondences which, though arising out of universal truth, nevertheless point to a temporal unity as well. Essentially the Egyptian Mysteries, like the *yoga* of Tantrism, consisted in the “return” or “retracing” of the creation of the cosmos inwardly, so that just as in the Beginning (which always is, being supratemporal) there was only Bliss—pure Consciousness—so too the mortal who “sheds this mortal coil” (or perhaps more accurately, releases it) recapitulates inwardly and inversely the Creation, attaining through her, the Creative Power, union with the Primordial.²¹

It is interesting, while considering this parallelism between the Tantric tradition and the ancient Egyptian, to note that a predominant symbol of Isis was the Cow (Nut), not only because she is a manifestation of the abundance of the Earth, and because she is emblematic of the shift

from the primordial Golden Age to the traditional agriculture of ancient Egypt (based upon wheat, barley and cattle)—being therefore symbols of Isis and of traditional civilisation, both of which lie mediate between the “above” and the “below” but also because the two horns of the cow suggests the horns of the waxing moon, the duality of



Sanctuary of Isis-Magna Mater, Mainz, Germany. Photo © 2003 Martin Bahmann/Wikimedia Commons.



The Great Mother of all ten thousand things cannot vanish;
it is only we who become blind to her wisdom and solace.

the world of generation as well. And the symbol of the sacred cow reappears in the *Upanisads*, where speech is likened to a celestial cow, of which the first two udders are of the Gods (*svāhā, vasāt*), the third is that of man (*hanta*), and the fourth is that of the fathers (*pitṛ*), and termed *svaddhā*.²² The vital breath is her bull; Mind is her calf. And so once again we see the perennial Trinity: Osiris, the bull; Isis, the cow; and Horus, the calf.

Various Traditions Can Illumine One Another

Now we must, throughout consideration of these matters, keep in mind that although we speak in dualistic terms of Siva and Sakti, of Osiris and Isis, these are not separate entities but rather aspects or emanations of one another, and of the Supreme Lord, Isvāra, himself an emanation of the Divine Sun. Indeed, this is perhaps the central error of the modern in turning to ancient metaphysics: the false attribution of literalism and dualism to the traditional—like the Chinese Taoist teaching of *yin* and *yang*, for which mere dualism would be anathema, unthinkable, such teaching belonging as it does to the world of primordial unity. As a result, the various traditions can illumine one another, in so far as each is a reflection of the same principial unity—and this illumination is especially necessary today, due to modern fragmentation and incomprehension.

In any event, having examined Isis's significance in terms of cosmology, and in terms of the initiation of Lucius, it is apparent that, however magnificent the metaphysical implications of her



Wooden statue of Quan Am Nhin Mat Nhin Tay (Quan Am of 1,000 Eyes and 1,000 Hands) (The Bodhisattva Kanzeon/Quan Yin), ca. 1656. But Thap Pagoda in Bac Ninh Province of Northern Vietnam. Photo by DoktorMax/Wikimedia Commons.

as Creator, it is evident that her power and historical longevity (in the fourth century AD when Christianity was finally able to destroy the remnants of the religions of antiquity, Hers was still the predominant sect) was due to her answering a primordial need within man, an answer to individual longing. She, the *Magna Mater*, the Holy One, was the healer of man, She Who Resurrects, She Who Comes to the Aid of the Suffering, and who with them suffered, sitting “lowly and tearful” by the well of Byblos, She, humanity's never-absent *sanctum*, from Whom even the Gates of Hell were opened to those who were truly penitent.

And it was here that her true and unassailable religious power lay, not in

her cosmological meaning, but in the revelation of her Divine Mercy, her love, in her role as healer and comforter. In fact, it was common practice in ancient Egypt to sleep in her temples and, by virtue of the influences therein, to be healed, or to obtain a vision of her (aspects of the same Mercy). Essential to her working, though, was the element of surprise, of Divine Lightning. Like Kanzeon Bodhisattva her healings appeared when least expected, and when the future looked most dim; for then the Opening was there, so that the Divine might “burst forth,” illuminating and resurrecting life even as through the lamenting Isis Osiris could be resurrected from fragmentation and death.

And it is here, in individual revelation, in the dynamism of her infinite power, in the bestowing of peace and harmony upon those in distress, that Isis’s power still resides, still manifests, if one only has unswerving faith, dedication and devotion. The Great Mother of all ten thousand things cannot vanish; it is only we who become blind to her wisdom and solace. Yet when we turn back she is still there, as she was for Lucius, beckoning, alluring, welcoming.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Le Papyrus de Turin*, Pleyte, Rossi, 1869; 31ff. in E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians* (London: Methuen & Co., 1904), vol. I, 360.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 131ff., in Budge, *Gods of the Egyptians*, I, 361ff.

⁴ R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca; London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 59.

⁵ Inscribed on the walls of the royal tombs, XIXth Dynasty; Thebes. Budge, *Gods of the Egyptians*, I, 329.

⁶ We speak in the present tense because the same principal relation between man and God, revealer

and revelation, obtains now as in the ancient past: it is only our present incapacity to see which separates us from that ancient and purer unity which Rā represented.

⁷ *Thrice-Greatest Hermes*, trans. G.R.S. Mead (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906), vol. I, 284.

⁸ See Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Book XI.

⁹ Plutarch, *De Isis et Osiride*, XIV.7, XLIV.4.

¹⁰ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, Book X, Chapter XXXII.9.

¹¹ The sistrum of Isis, a sacred rattle which traditionally was said to contain four rattles, for the four elements, also contained three rods which “sang” the triple chords when the sistrum was moved. Hence the sistrum partook of the fourfold elementarities and of the “three worlds” of Hermetic cosmology. No doubt the three chords possessed harmonic and hence simultaneously symbolic significance of a Pythagorean kind. See Plutarch, *De Isis et Osiride*, LXIIIff. on the sistrum and its symbolism.

¹² Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Book XI.

¹³ Mead, *Hermes*, III, 149ff.

¹⁴ Plutarch, *De Isis et Osiride*, LXII.1.

¹⁵ See Tran Tam Tinh, *Essai sur le culte d’Isis à Pompeii* (Paris: Éditions E. de Boccard, 1964), pl. XIV; XLX.

¹⁶ *Diodorus Siculus*, I.12.3–7.

¹⁷ *Kubrika-tantra*, I.1.

¹⁸ *Samkhya-Pravacana Sutra*, III.66.

¹⁹ A. Avalon (John George Woodroffe), *The Serpent Power* (London, 1919), 346.

²⁰ Ibid., 351.

²¹ The path of *kundali*, of *sakti-yoga*, is traditionally differentiated from that of *dhyana-yoga*, from which the modern Zen Buddhism is derived, principally because in the former *siddhi* or powers are accumulated, the path being more gradual, whereas in the latter Liberation “takes place” in a flash (though not thereby denying the necessity of years of training and discipline).

²² *Brhad-arānyaka Upanisad*, V.9.1.

