

Tat Tvam Asi – Part I



SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

Introduction

The earlier essay¹ presented a broad outline of the *mahāvākyas* – their definition, importance, their total number and so on. In this essay the methodology of their interpretation will be delineated. We shall analyse a sample *mahāvākya*, ‘*Tat tvam asi - That thou art*’ and study the interpretative process involved in deciphering it. Since all the *mahāvākyas* have the same message to offer i.e., *jīva-brahma-aikya* or the essential oneness between the individual and *Brahman*, by understanding the interpretative techniques employed in deciphering ‘*Tat tvam asi*’, we shall also be able to interpret and understand the other *mahāvākyas*.

The Source

The *mahāvākya* — ‘*Tat tvam asi*’ is found in the sixth chapter of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. Herein, the teacher-father Rishi Uddālaka instructs his student-son Śvetaketu regarding the nature of *Brahman* and concludes his teaching by pointing out the *jīva-brahma-aikya* with the declaration — ‘*Tat tvam asi*’ which means ‘That thou art’. Śvetaketu, intending to comprehend it fully and not miss any of the deeper significances of this grand Teaching, requests for further and complete clarification and Rishi Uddālaka with various day-to-day examples, interesting similes and elaborate metaphors, brings home to his son, the nature of the oneness between the Self and *Brahman*. All together, Rishi Uddālaka declares this *mahāvākya* ‘*Tat tvam asi*,’ nine times making this section of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* one of the finest masterpieces of *Upaniṣadic* literature.

¹July 2004 issue of *Tapovan Prasad*

The Sentence

The sentence 'Tat tvam asi' is made of three words (*pada*) 1. *tat* 2. *tvam* and 3. *asi*. The *tat-pada* (the word 'tat') is the third person singular pronoun in Sanskrit which means 'that'; the *tvam-pada* (the word 'tvam') is the second person singular pronoun and means 'you' (or 'thou' in classical English) and *asi-pada* (word 'asi') is the verb of the sentence, which means 'are' (or in the classical English 'art'). Thus the sentence 'Tat tvam asi' means 'That you are' or to put it in its common archaic English form, it is 'That thou art'. The verbal form 'asi' denotes the identity between 'tat' and 'tvam' and is hence called '*aikya-pada*' or 'the word which signifies oneness'.

One may represent 'Tat tvam asi' mathematically as $tat = tvam$, wherein '*asi-pada*' is represented by '=' (equal to) sign. For the identity to be established between 'tat' and 'tvam', we need to enquire into the exact meanings of *tat* and *tvam*.

Meaning of 'Tat'

Since the Sanskrit word 'tat' (meaning 'that') is only a pronoun, it has to necessarily connote a preceding noun as per the rules of sentence interpretation: '*tatpadasya avyavahita-pūrvavākya-mukhyaviśeṣya-parāmarśitvam* — the pronoun 'tat' indicates the immediately preceding key noun'. Hence to understand the pronoun 'tat' (that), we need to track down the preceding key noun. The preceding key noun in the context of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (sixth chapter) is *Īśvara*, the Lord Himself, who is the Creator of the universe. *Īśvara* is described in in this section of the *Upaniṣad* under consideration as the '*sad-vastu*' (Existence-Principle) and as the Creator. Please note the tenor of the following lines — *sadeva somya idamagra āsit..... tadaikṣata bahu syām prajāyeyeti tattejo'sṛjata...*In the beginning, dear one, there was Existence alone...That Existence willed, "May I become many, may I grow forth'. It created fire..." It is from these and other similar *Upaniṣadic* sentences that the conclusion of the pronoun 'tat' (that) referring to *Īśvara* (Lord) is arrived at.

Īśvara or Lord in *Vedānta*, by definition, is the Existence-Consciousness Principle with the *samaṣṭi upādhis* (total conditioning)

of – *kāraṇa* (causal), *sūkṣma* (subtle) and *sthūla* (gross) *prapañca* (world)². Hence one may say mathematically that *tat* (*Īśvara* or Lord) = Existence-Consciousness principle + total conditioning (*samaṣṭi upādhi*).

Since the Lord is endowed with the *samaṣṭi-upādhis*, the total conditioning which has the predominance of *sattva*, He exhibits the characteristics of omniscience (*sarvajñatva*), omnipotence (*sarveśvaratva*) and so on. Further the Lord, the Supreme Creator and Destroyer of the universe is naturally known as different or apart from oneself (*parokṣa*). The very word 'tat' (that), is grammatically third person singular, which obviously expresses the sense of difference and distance. In *Vākyaṅvṛtti* (Verse 45) Sri Sankaracarya explains the *Tat-pada* (word *Tat*):

मायोपाधिर्जगद्योनिः सर्वज्ञत्वादिलक्षणः ।

पारोक्ष्यशबलः सत्याद्यात्मकस्तत्पदाभिधः ॥

māyopādhirjagadyoniḥ sarvajñatvādilikṣaṇaḥ ।

pāroṣyaśabalaḥ satyādyātmakastatpadābhidhaḥ ॥

The Consciousness that is endowed with the conditioning of *māyā* (by implication the *sthūla* and *sūkṣma* also), which is the cause of the universe, described as omniscient etc., which is only mediately known and having the nature of Existence etc., is the word-meaning of the term 'Tat'.

Meaning of 'Tvam'

The word '*tvam*' literally means 'you'. In the specific context of *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (sixth chapter) it stands for the individual Śvetaketu since Rishi Uddālaka, the Guru, addresses Śvetaketu with this second person singular pronoun '*tvam*' (you). But in its general context, the word '*tvam*' stands for any individual listener to whom this *mahāvākya upadesha* is bestowed. The 'individual'

² Please note that the word *Īśvara* is used in *Vedānta* to denote

- the Lord endowed with the conditioning of *samaṣṭi-sthūla-sūkṣma-kāraṇa-prapañca* as well as
- the Lord with only the conditioning of the *kāraṇa-prapañca* or *māyā*.

The '*tat-pada*' here refers to the first one. This is similar to the word *prāṇa* denoting all the five *prāṇas* as well as the first individual *prāṇa* which governs respiration. Their meanings are understood as per the context and hence there need not be any fear of confusion arising due to these words having dual meanings.

is the person who is denoted by the word 'aham', the 'I' and this 'aham' is technically described as the *saihsārī jīva* (transmigrating individual).

The *jīva* or the individual, by definition is the Existence-Consciousness Principle with the *vyāṣṭi upādhi* or individual conditionings³ of *kāraṇa* (causal), *sūkṣma* (subtle) and *sthūla* (gross) *śarīra* (body). One may indicate this mathematically as: *tvam* (*jīva* or *individual*) = *Existence-Consciousness principle* + *individual conditioning* (*vyāṣṭi upādhi*).

The individual or *jīva* possesses only the *vyāṣṭi upādhi*⁴ which has the natural predominance of impure *sattva* (*malina sattva*). Possessing incomplete knowledge (*alpajñatva*), under the control of *māyā*, with entirely different characteristics, the *jīva* is in no way similar to *Īśvara*. This *jīva* which is experienced as 'aham' ('I') is always felt directly (*aparokṣa*) as oneself. Sri Sankaracharya, in *Vākyavṛtti* (Verse 44), gives the precise meaning of the *tvam-pada* (word *tvam*):

आलम्बनतयाभाति योऽस्मत्प्रत्ययशब्दयोः ।
अन्तःकरणसंभिन्नबोधः स त्वंपदाभिधः ॥

ālambanatayābhāti yo'smatpratyayaśabdayoḥ ।
antaḥkaraṇasambhinnabodhaḥ sa tvampadābhidhaḥ ॥

The Consciousness which is conditioned by the subtle body (and by implication the gross as well as the causal body) and which is the object of the idea and word 'I' is the word meaning of the term '*tvam*'.

Contrast between 'Tat' And 'Tvam'

'Tat' which denotes *Īśvara* and '*tvam*' which denotes the *jīva* are (at first sight) absolutely distinct from each other. 'Tat' is the eternally free (*nitya-mukta*) Lord and '*tvam*' is the bound (*baddha*) individual!

The following tabular column presents some salient differences between '*Tatpadārtha Īśvara*' (i.e., the Lord who is referred to by

³ Contrast this with *Īśvara* who is the same Existence-Consciousness principle with the *samaṣṭi upādhi*.

⁴ Unlike *Īśvara* who is endowed with *samaṣṭi upādhi*.

the word 'Tat') and 'tvampadārtha jīva' (i.e., the individual who is referred to by the word- 'Tvam'):

<i>Tat = Īśvara</i>	<i>Tvam = jīva</i>
<i>Suddha-sattva-upādhi</i> vat - possessing the conditioning with the predominance of pure <i>sattva</i>	<i>Malina-sattva-upādhi</i> vat - possessing the conditioning with the predominance of impure <i>sattva</i>
<i>Māyāpati</i> - Lord of <i>māyā</i>	<i>Māyādāsa</i> - constrained by <i>māyā</i>
<i>Sarveśvara</i> - Lord of all. Also described as <i>Niyāmaka</i> - controller.	<i>Parādhi</i> naḥ - under the control of the Lord. Also described as <i>Niyamyaka</i> - controlled.
<i>Sarvajña</i> - possessing complete knowledge	<i>Alpajña</i> - possessing limited knowledge
<i>Apārānandavat</i> - having complete and eternal Bliss unalloyed by sorrow.	<i>Anandaleśavat</i> - experiencing only incomplete and impermanent joy, mixed with sorrow.
<i>Nityamukta</i> - eternally free	<i>Baddha</i> - bound

Sri Sankaracharya, in *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (verse 242), gives some very striking examples to bring out the essential differences between *Tat* and *Tvam*:

खद्योतभान्वोरिव राजभृत्ययोः कूपाम्बुराशयोः परमाणुमेवोः ॥

...*Khadyotabhānvoriva rājabhṛtyayoḥ kūpāmburāśyoḥ paramāṇumerovoḥ* ॥

These two (*jīva* and *Īśvara*) are of mutually opposed characteristics like the glow-worm and the sun, the servant and the king, the well and the ocean and like the atom and the earth.

Each of the above pairs - in the example elucidates one important difference between *jīva* and *Īśvara*. The glow-worm and sun example (being in the context of effulgence), is in the perspective of limited knowledge-unlimited knowledge (*kiñcijñatva-*

sarvajñatva) – the *jīva* is endowed with limited knowledge and *Īśvara* possesses complete knowledge; the king-servant example is in the context of controlled-controller (*niyamiya-niyāmaka*) – the *jīva* being the controlled and *Īśvara* being the controller; the well-ocean is in the matter of limited joy-unlimited bliss (*ānandaleśa-apārānanda*) – the *jīva* experiences only incomplete and impermanent happiness mixed with pain and sorrow while *Īśvara* enjoys unlimited and unalloyed Bliss, untouched by any kind of sorrow or pain and finally the atom-earth example is with respect to their individual pervasiveness – all-pervasiveness (*ekadeśagatatva-sarvagatatva*) – the *jīva* being limited in its pervasiveness and *Īśvara* being all-pervading.

The Dvaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita standpoints

The above differences are extreme and one entity cannot have these kinds of contradictory qualities like limited knowledge and unlimited knowledge, being controlled and being the controller etc., at the same time. The Advaita school of Vedāntic thought led by Sri Sankara interprets '*Tat tvam asi*' as 'That thou art', declaring thereby the essential oneness or identity between the *Tatpadārtha* *Īśvara* and *tvampadārtha jīva*. The expected pertinent question is, how can *Īśvara* and *jīva* be identical when it is utterly illogical to posit an entity with two contradictory characteristics? This *advaitic* interpretation of '*Tat tvam asi*' has come under heavy criticism and batter from the other Vedāntic schools like *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita* schools. They criticise the *advaitic* interpretation as absolutely thoughtless and extremely untenable owing to the obviously evident disparity between *Īśvara* and *jīva*.

Sri Ramanujacharya, the propounder of *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta*, considers the two words '*Tat*' and '*tvam*' as a compound word '*Tattvam*'. The sentence then becomes '*Tattvam asi*'. He then interprets '*Tattvam asi*' as '*Tasya tvam asi*', meaning '*you are His*'⁵. This interpretation implies – '*you, the individual jīva belong to Īśvara*'.

Sri Madhvacharya, the propounder of *Dvaita Vedānta* also takes the two words *Tat* and *tvam* as a compound '*tattvam*', but interprets it in the context of resemblance (*sārūpya*) – '*Tad iva tvam asi*' i.e.,

⁵This is technically called *śāṣṭhī tatpuruṣa samāsa*.

'you are like Him'⁶. According to Madhvacharya, the *jīva* by devotion to *Īśvara* wins His grace and favour and comes to attain a form similar to that of the Lord Himself in the abode of the Lord after dropping the present physical embodiment. This *sārūpyatā* (similarity of form) is considered as *mukti* (Liberation) for the *Dvaita Vedāntins* (dualists)⁷.

Some *Dvaitins* describe '*Tat tvam asi*' as mere eulogy (*arthavāda*) and opine that it should be accepted only with a pinch of salt, just as in the case of a 'man being praised as a lion' or as in the instance of a 'King being extolled as the Lord'. Others with supercilious ingenuity use some fuzzy grammatical rules and change the sentence '*Tat tvam asi*' to '*Ataḥ tvam asi* — you are not *That*!' Such is the perpetual controversy these simple looking three words — '*Tat*', '*Tvam*' and '*asi*' have generated!

The Advaita standpoint

In spite of the heavy battering from *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, *Dvaita* etc., the champions of *Advaita Vedānta* have not relented or conceded. The interpretations of the *mahāvākya* '*Tat tvam asi*', by both the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita* schools of *Vedānta* accept a partial or complete distinction between the *Tatpadavācyārtha* *Īśvara* and *tvampadavācyārtha* *jīva*. Whether one accepts that the individual belongs to the Lord (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*) or the individual has some form similar to the Lord (*Dvaita*), there is a blatant acceptance of duality in both the interpretations. The problem with these interpretations is that they are totally opposed to the *Vedic* standpoint.

The *Srutis* vehemently declare that there is no duality whatsoever in such statements such as '*neha nānāsti kiñcana* —

⁶ This is technically called *karmadhāraya samāsa* as in the case of '*candramukhī* — face like a moon' and '*ghanaśyāma* — dark like the cloud'.

⁷ There is no attempt made herein to elaborate the philosophy of *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita* as this would be a digression from the main topic.

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On the spiritual path there may be ups
and downs but never a fall.

Swami Chinmayananda

there is not even a wee bit of plurality whatsoever'. To further re-emphasise and assert the absence of duality, they warn the dualists of the severe consequences by such sentences — '*mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyuṃ gacchati ya iha nāneva paśyati* — he who gives reality to duality transmigrates from death to death'. These *Vedic* statements supporting *Advaita* are not just a few stray declarations, they are there in abundance. Emboldened by the strong support to non-duality by the *Vedas*, the *Advaitins* hold strong to their position of *jīva-Brahma-aikya* i.e., the identity between *jīva* and *Īśvara* as the true meaning of the *mahāvākya* '*Tat tvam asi*'.

Conclusion

But the question still persists as to how *Īśvara* and *jīva* can be equated as one, when they seem to possess totally different characteristics. *Advaita Vedānta* remains true to the message of the *Vedas* and there lies its philosophical strength. The *advaitic* interpretation of '*Tat tvam asi*' is a challenge to the intellect and is a delight to all students of *Vedānta*. May this Knowledge not remain purely intellectual but be actualised as Personal Experience by the grace of the Lord and the blessings of the Guru. In the next essay we shall explore the *advaitic* interpretation of '*Tat tvam asi*'.

ERRATA	Former Name	Deeksha Name
<p>Owing to a mis-communication, the Former Names and Deeksha Names of the <i>Brahmacharins</i> of the Eighth Vedanta Course, Sidhabari, were interchanged in the July issue of <i>Tapovan Prasad</i>. Our profound apologies for the error. We publish the correct information here.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">The Editor</p>	Nilima	Brni. Prerana Chaitanya
	Devi	Brni. Ankita Chaitanya
	Arati	Brni. Gitika Chaitanya
	Lakshmi	Brni. Swati Chaitanya
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Rohan	Br. Eknath Chaitanya	