Mahavakya

SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

Introduction

The Upanisads emphatically proclaim — 'sarvam khalvidam brahma' — All this is Brahman alone. In the earlier essay on 'apavāda'1 we had seen how the whole world can be resolved into Brahman. Even if the whole world is perceived as Brahman, if the individual still continues to maintain the wrong notion of himself being the ignorant, suffering, miserable jīva, samsāra will still continue to be. Hence apavāda is complete only if one's own inner Self, i.e., the pratyagātman, is directly known to be one with Brahman. This direct experience (aparokṣānubhūti) is achieved only by 'mahāvākyya-vicāra' or 'enquiry into the mahā-vākyas'. The forthcoming essays will deal with this final topic of Vedānta. In fact, the whole system of adhyātropa-apavāda2 is built to enable the direct apprehension of this identity between the pratyagātman and Brahman. But before we enter into further discussions we need to be clear about ‘the precise nature of a ‘mahāvākya’. This shall be the topic of the present essay.

Mahāvākyā — Definition

Vedic sentences like 'Tat tvam asi' (That Thou Art), 'Aham brahmāsmi' (I am Brahman) etc., which reveal the identity of the inner-Self (pratyagātman) with Brahman are called mahāvākyas. Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda used to define mahāvākyas in the most unambiguous way as ‘identity-revealing-statements’. This identity between the pratyagātman and Brahman is technically

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1 Refer to June 2004 issue of Tapovan Prasad.
2 Refer to ‘Adhyātropa and Apavāda’ in June 2003 issue of Tapovan Prasad.
called ‘jīva-brahma-aikya’ (jīva – the inner Self, brahma – Brahman and aikya – identity or oneness). Since the enquiry into these ‘identity-revealing-statements’ is the only means of liberation from saṁsāra, these statements are given the greatest honour in vedantic literature and are glorified as mahāvākyas, meaning ‘great statements’. In Vākyavṛtti, Sri Sankaracharya explains the theme of the mahāvākyas and establishes their pivotal role in liberation:

तत्त्वमस्याविद्ययो बजस्वपरमात्माः
तत्त्वात्मविषयं ज्ञानं तदिनेभु मुक्तिसाधनम्

The knowledge of the identity of the individual Self and the Universal Self, originating from Vedic statements such as ‘That Thou Art’ is the means to liberation.

It is only the mahāvākyas that point out our real nature and therefore without the understanding of the mahāvākyas, liberation is impossible. Sankṣepa-śāriraka, a text written by Sri Sarvajnamūri emphasises the absolute importance of this mahāvākyas-vicāra — ‘Vinā mahāvākyamato na kascīt pumāṁsām advaitam avaiti jantuh—without the mahāvākyas, no person is capable of knowing the nondual nature of the inner Self’.

**Mahāvākyas — Their Number**

Every Upaniṣad will have mahāvākyas. This is because the theme of every Upaniṣad is ‘jīva-brahma-aikya’. Thus we have in the Kaṭhopaniṣad, the mahāvākyas, ‘etad vai tad – This verily is That’ and in the Kaivalya Upaniṣad, the mahāvākyas – ‘tat tvameva tvameva tat – That is you and you verily are That’. Although every Upaniṣad

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3 Vākyavṛtti is a terse text of 53 verses elaborating on the significance of the mahāvākyas – ‘tattva anta’.

4 Traditionally 108 Upaniṣads which are enumerated in the Muktikopaniṣad are considered as authentic.

5 For an elaborate appraisal of how the essential theme of all Upaniṣads is ‘jīva-brahma-aikya’, refer to July 2002 issue of Tapovan Prasad titled ‘What Does The Word Upaniṣad Mean?’
will have at least one mahāvākyya (and hence there will have to be numerous mahāvākyas), we find attempts to enumerate the most important of them. Sri Kaivalyasrami gives a list of eleven important mahāvākyas in his Mahāvākyya-vicārana:

1. ॥ तत्त्वंमसि ॥ Tattvamasi ॥
   That thou art.

2. ॥ अहं ब्रह्मस्व ॥ Aham brahmaśmi ॥
   I am Brahman.

3. ॥ अयमात्मा ब्रह्म ॥ Ayamātmā brahma ॥
   This Self is Brahman.

4. ॥ एसा त आत्मान्तप्यामृतः ॥ Eṣa ta atmāntaryāmyamṛtaḥ ॥
   This is your Self which is the inner controller and is immortal.

5. ॥ स यथाशयं पुरुषं यथासावातितवे स एकः ॥ Sa yaścāyaṁ puruṣe yaścāśāvāditye sa ekaḥ ॥
   He that is here in this human person, and He that is there in the sun, are one.

6. ॥ प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठा प्रज्ञानं ब्रह्म ॥ Prajñā pratiṣṭhā praṇāṇāṁ brahma ॥
   Consciousness is the support, Consciousness is Brahman.

7. ॥ विज्ञानमायनं ब्रह्म ॥ Vijñānamāyaṇaṁ brahma ॥
   Brahman is Consciousness-Bliss.

8. ॥ सत्त्वं ज्ञानमानं ब्रह्म ॥ Satyam jñānamānaṁ brahma ॥
   Brahman is Existence-Consciousness-Infinity.

9. ॥ स एवमेव पुरुषः ब्रह्म ॥ Sa evameva puruṣo brahma ॥
   This being is verily Brahman.

10. ॥ सर्वं खल्लिद्वं ब्रह्म ॥ Sarvam khalvidaṁ brahma ॥
    All this is verily Brahman.

11. ॥ एकमेवाविवेकेत्यं ब्रह्म ॥ Ekamevaāvivekyāṁ brahma ॥
    Brahman is one alone and non-dual.

Even though any Upanisadic statement, which has jīva-brahma-
aikya as its theme, is a mahāvākyya, we find only four of them are popularly described as mahāvākyas. That is because, in the vedantic tradition, one mahāvākyya from each Veda is taken as representative of all the mahāvākyas of that Veda. The Vedas being divided into four (Rg, Yajur, Sāma and Atharvaṇa Veda), the total number of representative mahāvākyas also becomes four. The following tabular column gives some important details of this popular set of four mahāvākyas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mahāvākyas</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Upaniṣad</th>
<th>Veda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ध्यानं ध्या</td>
<td>Consciousness is Brahman.</td>
<td>Aitreya Upaniṣad (3.3)</td>
<td>Rg Veda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prajñānām Brahma</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. अह ब्रह्माःस्मि ।</td>
<td>I am Brahman</td>
<td>Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (1.4.10)</td>
<td>Yajur Veda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahai brahmāśmi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. तत् त्वमासि ।</td>
<td>That thou art.</td>
<td>Chandogya Upaniṣad (6.8.7)</td>
<td>Sāma Veda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tat tvamasi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. अयमात्मा ध्या ।</td>
<td>This Self is Brahman.</td>
<td>Māndūkya Upaniṣad (1.2)</td>
<td>Atharvaṇa Veda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayaṁātmā brahma</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The selection of these four mahāvākyas is not at random but is based on the strength of their directness and brevity. But it is equally important to note that the popularity of this set of four mahāvākyas does not disqualify the other jīva-brahma-aikya-bodhaka-vākyas from being termed as mahāvākyas.

**Mahāvākyas—Dramatisation**

Sometimes these four mahāvākyas are beautifully connected by dramatising and weaving a story through them.

\[\text{Jīva-brahma-aikya-bodhaka-vākyā} = \text{jīva (inner-Self) + brahma (Brahman) + aikya (identity) + bodhaka (propound) + vākyā (sentence). This Sanskrit compound means 'a sentence which propounds the identity of the individual inner Self with Brahman.}\]
The disciple approaches the Guru and requests him to explain the nature of the ultimate Truth. Naturally the Guru first defines the Truth to the student — prajñānam brahma (Consciousness is Brahman). Since this statement defines Brahman it is called laksāṇa vākya or a ‘statement of definition’.

The student reflects upon it and gets an inkling that the subjective Consciousness, which is ever being experienced as the ‘I’, is what is being pointed out by the teacher as the Truth. But this vague knowledge is riddled with doubts because the student had always thought that the ultimate Truth is somewhere beyond him. Hence he comes back to the Teacher seeking further clarification. The Guru now declares clearly that the seeker is the Sought by propounding tat tvamasi (That thou art). This upādeśa or ‘teaching’ is called the upādeśa vākya or the ‘statement of instruction’.

Now the student being free of doubts regarding the Teaching sits in meditation and overcomes his habitual thinking of the Truth being something apart from him and that it is to be searched for outside. He gets rid of the notion that the upādhis7 are the Self and begins to actualise (apurkṣānubhūti) the Self as one with Brahman. His experience is of the nature of ahān brahmāsmi (I am Brahman). This becomes the ‘anubhava vākya’ or the ‘statement of experience’.

Once he is established in his real nature the Guru advises him to revel and abide in the Knowledge constantly. The nature of his abidance is ayam ātma brahma (This self is Brahman). The student never loses sight of this experiential Knowledge even when perceiving the world of objects around him. This mahāvākya is called the ‘anusandhāna vākya’ or the ‘statement of constant practice’.

Please note that the above is only an interesting dramatisation with an intent to connect all the four mahāvākyas in a logical sequence, thereby providing us hints on the road map of our personal sādhanā — listen, reflect, meditate, experience and abide. Nothing more is intended than that. Every mahāvākya is complete by itself and each has within itself the potential to grant liberation.

7 Upādhis are the conditionings of the three śāstras or the five kośas. These topics have been covered in the previous essays.
to a fit aspirant\(^8\) without the requirement of other mahāvākyas. Sometimes, we find that the same four mahāvākyas are presented in a different order of dramatisation\(^9\). This only goes to prove that all the mahāvākyas are same, equally potent and unanimously give only one message, viz., the jīva-brahma-aikya.

Conclusion

In this essay we have had an overview of the mahāvākyas – their definition, their absolute need, their total number and their dramatisation. In the next essay we shall study the mahāvākya ‘Tat tvam asi – That thou art’ and try to understand the actual methodology of enquiry into a mahāvākya. Once we understand the methodology of enquiry into one mahāvākya we shall see that the same methodology applies to the others also.

May the grace of the Lord and the blessings of Pujya Gurudev help us in comprehending this grand finale of Vedānta.

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\(^8\) The fit aspirant is sādhanā-catuṣṭaya-sampanma-adhikārī. Refer to the essays from August 2002 to December 2002.

\(^9\) For the various dramatisations of the four mahāvākyas refer to Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayanandaji’s commentary on Vākyā Vṛtti, Verse 5; Pujya Guruji Swami Tejomayanandaji’s commentary on Pūrṇaṣṭ, Chapter 5, Verse 8, and Pujya Swamini Vimalanandaji’s ‘Notes on Chandogya Upanisad, (Chapter 6) 6.16.6. All of them are CCMT Publications.

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**SHRADDHANJALI**

It is with a deep sense of loss that the members of Chinmaya Mission, Visakhapatnam, received the news of the untimely demise of Smt. Shanti Devi Mittal, wife of Sri. C.L. Mittal, President, Chinmaya Mission, Visakhapatnam, on February 14, 2004. She was an ardent devotee of Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda and served the Chinmaya Mission devotedly for many years. The Chinmaya Family conveys their heartfelt condolence to the bereaved family members.