Tat Tvam Asi –
Part I

SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

Introduction

The earlier essay\(^1\) 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.

\(^1\)July 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 avyayahita-paroavakyamukhyavishaya-paramarshitvam — 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 Chândogya Upanisad (sixth chapter) is Īśvara, the Lord Himself, who is the Creator of the universe. Īśvara is described in in this section of the Upanisad under consideration as the ‘sad-vastu’ (Existence-Principle) and as the Creator. Please note the tenor of the following lines — sadêva somya idamagra āsît..... tadaikṣata bahu syam prajāyeyeti tattejo’srjata...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 Upanisadic sentences that the conclusion of the pronoun ‘tat’ (that) referring to Īśvara (Lord) is arrived at.

Īśvara or Lord in Vedânta, by definition, is the Existence-Consciousness Principle with the samaśti upâdhis (total conditioning)
of – kāraṇa (causal), sūkṣma (subtle) and sthūla (gross) prapāṭha (world). 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 satīva, He exhibits the characteristics of omniscience (sarvajñātva), 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 Vākyāvatī (Verse 45) Sri Sankaracarya explains the Tat-pada (word Tat):

मागोपाधिकिर्मणौनि: सत्वत्वादिरिज्ज्ञेणः।
पारोक्ष्यशब्दः: सत्याघातकस्तत्तपदाधिभिः॥
māyopādhirjagadyonih sarvajñatvādilakṣanah |
pārokṣyaśabalah satyādīyaṃ makastatpadābhūtah ||

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 mahāvākyo upadesha is bestowed. The ‘individual’

2 Please note that the word Īśvara is used in Vedānta to denote
a. the Lord endowed with the conditioning of samaṣṭi-sthūla-sūkṣma-kāraṇa-prapāṭha as well as
b. the Lord with only the conditioning of the kāraṇa-prapāṭha 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.

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is the person who is denoted by the word 'aham', the 'I' and this 'aham' is technically described as the saṁsārī 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 upādhi⁴ which has the natural predominance of impure sattva (malina sattva). Possessing incomplete knowledge (alpajñātva), 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):

आत्मवन्तत्तामात्ति योःसम्प्रत्यक्तयश्चेद्योऽः
अन्तःकरणासिद्धायोऽः स्तवपदमवः

ālambanatAYābhāti yo' smatpratyayaśabdāyoh
antaḥkaraṇasambhinābodhah sa tvampadābhidhah

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 somaṣṭi upādhi.

⁴ Unlike Īśvara who is endowed with somaṣṭi upādhi.
the word ‘Tat’) and ‘tvampadārītha jīva’ (i.e., the individual who is referred to by the word- ‘Tvam’):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tat = Īśvara</th>
<th>Tvam = jīva</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>buddha-sattva-upādhivat - possessing the conditioning with the predominance of pure sattva</td>
<td>Malina-sattva-upādhivat - possessing the conditioning with the predominance of impure sattva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Māyāpati - Lord of māyā</td>
<td>Māyādāsa - constrained by māyā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarveśvara – Lord of all.</td>
<td>Parādmahā - under the control of the Lord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Also described as Niyāmaka – controller.</td>
<td>Also described as Niyamyaka – controlled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarvajña - possessing complete knowledge</td>
<td>Alpajña - possessing limited knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apārānanda - having complete and eternal Bliss unalloyed by sorrow.</td>
<td>Anandaleśavat - experiencing only incomplete and impermanent joy, mixed with sorrow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nityamukta - eternally free</td>
<td>Baddha - bound</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

खंड्घोठमान्विधिरिक्षश्राममत्रत्योः कूपामुन्द्रायोः परमाणुमेनोः ||

...Khadyotabhānnoriva rājabhītyayoh kūpāmburāśyoḥ paramāṇumeroḥ ||

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 (kiñci jñātva-
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 Vedantic thought led by Sri Sankara interprets ‘Tat tvam asi’ as ‘That thou art’, declaring thereby the essential oneness or identity between the Tatpadartha Īśvara and tvamadārtha 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 Vedantic 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’. This interpretation implies – ‘you, the individual jīva belong to Īśvara’.

Sri Madhava ċārya, 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.,

“This is technically called sārūpya tattvam āsāṃśa.”
'you are like Him'. 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 sārūpyata (similarity of form) is considered as mukti (Liberation) for the Dvaita Vedāntins (dualists).

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 'Aita 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 Tatpadācāyārtha Īśvara and tvampadācāyārtha 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 —

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6 This is technically called karmadhāraya samāsa as in the case of 'candramukhi — face like a moon' and 'ghanasyāma — 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.
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 — ‘mṛtyuḥ sa mṛtyum 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

Owing to a miscommunication, the Former Names and Deeksha Names of the Brahmacharins of the Eighth Vedanta Course, Sidhabari, were interchanged in the July issue of Tapovan Prasad. Our profound apologies for the error. We publish the correct information here.

The Editor