

Tat Tvam Asi: *You Are That*

Swami Vedapurushananda

Ram: Hey Shyam! How are you? I haven't seen you for a long time.
Shyam: I am fine. But the happenings in our country depresses me of late.

R: Do you mean the unending antics of our politicians?

S: No. That's always there. But the mindless killings of innocent civilians by terror attacks, that too in the name of religion, is nauseating. It creates an aversion in my mind towards religion. Is there not a religion that is universal and tolerant, that can unite all these warring religions in love and peace?

R: No Shyam, don't blame religions for these heinous crimes. They are not at fault. It is we humans who use religion for our selfish ends. For that matter, no religion asks its followers to kill innocent people. As to your second query, there is a philosophy that has the potential to become a universal religion. It is called Vedanta, Advaita Vedanta. Have you heard about it?

S: Vedanta? I know a company by that name.

R (laughing): Oh no! I don't mean that. Vedanta is the comprehensive philosophy based on the Vedas, the oldest book of humanity.

S: Vedas! The name sounds exotic. Can you tell me something about it?

R: Vedas are the bedrock of Indian culture and civilisation. By Vedas, we primarily mean the eternal spiritual laws that were discovered by ancient rishis in their meditations. Since these laws were not the product of any person, they are called *apaurusheya* and as they were transmitted orally, they are also called 'Shruti'.

They were divided into four by Vyasa. They are Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda. The Rig Veda mainly contains verses in metrical form. The text of the Yajur Veda is in prose. The Sama Veda has songs set to music. All the three forms of metre, prose, and song are found in the Atharva Veda.

Each Veda is broadly divided into three parts:

- Samhitas: They contain prayers to different deities.
- Brahmanas: They deal with rituals to attain desired results.
- Aranyakas: They deal with knowledge and contemplation.

Upanishads are texts containing knowledge leading to the realisation of one's true nature.

These texts are found in any of the three parts mentioned earlier, but mostly in the Aranyakas.

S: Interesting! What are these Upanishads? I am hearing about them for the first time.

R: Upanishads primarily stand for the sacred and secret knowledge that is capable of removing our primordial ignorance, leading to liberation. Etymologically the word may also mean the knowledge that is gained by sitting at the feet of the guru. Secondly it denotes the book. Its other name is Vedanta for it appears at the end, *-anta*, of the Vedas. There are hundreds of Upanishads, of which eleven Upanishads commented by Acharya Shankara are considered important.

S: What is the place of Upanishads in Hinduism?

R: They occupy a very high place. They are

one of the foundational texts of Hinduism. In fact, the Sanatana Dharma is based on the secure foundation of three *prasthanas* or paths. They are:

- Shruti *prasthanas*: The Upanishads.
- Smriti *prasthanas*: The Bhagavadgita.
- Nyaya *prasthanas*: The *Brahma Sutra*.

S: Tell me more about the Upanishads. What do they contain?

R: You see Shyam, Upanishads are a veritable mine-house of religious and philosophical ideas. They have been systematised and interpreted to give out a single coherent teaching by several acharyas according to their philosophical leanings. Thus, we have three main philosophical schools of Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Advaita.

They all believe in:

- Vedas and in its characteristic features that are already enumerated.
- Cyclical nature of creation, that is, the universe was not created out of nothing but it is only a projection with periodic evolution and involution.
- That there is a divine core within all of us that is eternal.

However, they differ in the relationship of the individual soul with God, on the nature of the world, concept of liberation, and in few other minor matters.

S: Well Ram! You mentioned about Advaita Vedanta. Where does it fit in all this?

R: Advaita is the fairest flower in the garden of Indian philosophical thought. A complete system of great intellectual daring and logical acumen, Advaita is the pinnacle of the spiritual thought attained anywhere in the world. According to Swami Vivekananda, it is the religion for the future. If a person wants to be rational and religious at the same time, Advaita is the religion. A comprehensive system that can harmonise all the warring sects and religions—it is the final word in religion.

S: Your description of Advaita is interesting and at the same time quite intimidating. I fear I don't have it in me to understand its teachings.

R: Don't worry. I will tell you the essence of Advaita in simple words. Listen.

Acharya Shankara presented Advaita in a nutshell in the following shloka: '*Brahma satyam jagat mithya, jivo brahmaiva na aparah*; Brahman is real, this universe is unreal, and the individual soul is nothing other than Brahman.'

It has three propositions:

1. Brahman alone is real.
2. The world is unreal.
3. *Jiva*, the individual soul, is none other than Brahman, the universal Self.

We shall study them in detail now.

'Brahman is Real': It means that Brahman is the only Reality. But what is this Brahman? Advaita defines Brahman both positively and negatively.

Positively it says:

- Brahman is absolute Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss.
- It is undifferentiated Consciousness.
- Brahman is that which is known directly and intimately and through which everything is known.

Negatively, Advaita defines Brahman as that which remains after negating everything else as 'not this, not this'. Brahman is not a concept to be defined. It is *nirguna*, devoid of all qualities; *nirvikara*, without any modifications; *nishkriya*, free from all actions; *nirvishesha*, which cannot be characterised, and so on.

S: I have a question, Ram. What is the criterion for Reality? On what basis do you claim that Brahman is Real and the world is unreal?

R: Good that you asked this question. The basic axiom in Advaita is: that which is eternal and unchanging at all times is Real and that which changes and perishes is unreal. This

phenomenal world of name and form is always changing, hence it is unreal, even though it is experienced. It disappears on the rise of true knowledge. We can also say that the world is apparently real and Brahman which is the substratum is Real because it always remains the same.

S: Two questions crop up in my mind. Shall I ask them?

R: Feel free to ask questions, Shyam. Advaita encourages its listeners to analyse, think, debate, and question. It does not thrust any dogmas on its adherents, to be believed blindly.

S: Wow! That's refreshing to hear. Okay. Now tell me how can the unreal world and the real Brahman coexist? And if Brahman is the only Reality, wherefrom did this world come up?

R: Yes. That's a key point to understand in Advaita: How did the One become the many?

They say that we don't experience both the One and the many at the same time and so the question of the relationship between them does not arise. When we 'see' the One, the many does not exist and when we deal with the many, the One is not perceived. The world is related to Brahman in the same way as the wave is related to the ocean.

Also, a relation can be only between two distinct items. But Brahman is not distinct from the world. It is Brahman alone, which appears as this universe and all the things in it. It is just like the relation between the gold and the ornaments made out of it. Ornaments differ in their name, form, and use, but they are all made of gold alone. Same is the case here. The only difference is that while the transformation of gold into ornaments is real, the transformation of Brahman into the world is only apparent, caused by maya.

S: What is this maya?

R: The principle assumed to account for the appearance of Brahman as the world is called maya. In the twilight, we mistake a rope for a

snake and are frightened. This superimposition of a non-existent snake on a rope is due to our ignorance. When the truth is known, the snake vanishes. But there is no change in the nature of the rope at any time. Similarly, Advaita claims that the world is the illusory projection on Brahman caused by maya and it vanishes when this maya is destroyed by true knowledge.

Maya is also defined as the power of Brahman. Brahman associated with maya is called *ishvara*.

S: I hope you will enlighten me more on *ishvara*.

R: The supreme Brahman with attributes is called *ishvara*. It is omniscient, omnipotent, possessor of all good qualities to the fullest measure, bestower of the fruits of our actions, and the creator, preserver, and destroyer of this universe. *Ishvara* is the controller of maya. Personal gods are various aspects of this *ishvara*, who also incarnates in human form as Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Christ, Buddha, and so on from time to time. In fact, *ishvara*, the universe, and the individual souls or *jivas* are apparent manifestations of the *nirguna* Brahman caused by maya. They are all co-existent.

S: Just now, you mentioned about the *jivas*. Tell me, how are these *jivas* related to Brahman?

R: Yes. Now we come to the climax of our discussion. I would like to recall what I stated earlier: '*Jivo brahmaiva na parah*'. We are not a part, modification, product of, or different from Brahman but we are Brahman. The sentence, '*Tat tvam asi; you are that*',² is a famous dictum of Advaita.

S: Hey Ram! What happened to you? Till now you were talking reasonably, suddenly what happened? You are blabbering something.

R: No, Shyam. Vedanta gives that shock to shake us from our stupor. Jiva is the reflection of pure Consciousness on the inner instrument,

antahkarana. It is like the reflection of the sun in water kept in different pots. Just as one sun appears to be many, one Brahman appears to have become innumerable souls. This is the result of ignorance. When all the pots are broken, the many reflected suns cease to exist. In the same way, the *jiva* maintains its individuality due to ignorance, *avidya*, and realises its true nature as 'Aham Brahmasmi; I am Brahman'³ on the destruction of ignorance by knowledge. The true nature of every *jiva* is eternal, ever pure, ever free Self, Atman. It is neither born nor does it die.

S: Wonderful to hear that my real nature is supreme Brahman. But still it is very difficult to believe.

R: See, it is not that Brahman is totally unknown to us in our present condition. It is the One undifferentiated consciousness that appears as the individual consciousness in all and all sensory enjoyments are a pale echo of that infinite bliss. Realised souls like Sri Ramakrishna saw God in everything.

Let me tell you a story narrated by Swamiji. It will bring some clarity. Once upon a time there was a pregnant lioness in a forest. One day in the course of hunting a flock of sheep, she gave birth to a lion cub and died of exertion. The sheep took the cub along with them and took care of him. He grew up like any other sheep, eating grass, bleating, and was mortally afraid of even a fox, what to speak of a lion. In the course of time, he grew up into a strong lion. But in thought and action, he always considered himself to be a weak sheep. One day a big lion started chasing this herd of sheep. He was astonished to see a young lion running helter-skelter amidst the sheep. He caught hold of the young lion and asked what the matter was.

The young sheep-lion trembled in fear and pleaded to spare his life. The older lion said:

'You are a lion. Stop bleating like a sheep.' But the younger one refused to accept this. Amused with his continuous whining to spare his life, the big lion took his ward to a river and asked to see his reflection in the water. The sheep-lion saw his reflected form in the water and was confused. Now a piece of raw flesh was thrust into his mouth. All his protests were in vain. Then the older lion began to roar and asked him to do the same. The sheep-lion tried his voice and was soon roaring as grandly as the other. And he was a sheep no longer.

So, Swamiji said: 'Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal; ye are not matter, ye are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter.'⁴

S: Now I am convinced. Is there any way of realising this truth?

R: Yes, there is. First thing you should realise is that you are already 'That'. You should be firmly convinced of this truth. Realisation is not a state to be attained or a thing to be produced. Just like scum covers water, ignorance has covered our true nature. Upon the dawn of knowledge, ignorance vanishes just as darkness vanishes in the presence of light and our true nature shines forth.

The steps for attaining Self-realisation according to Vedanta are:

1. Being endowed with the four qualifications called *sadhana-chatushtaya*, the quartet of spiritual disciplines. They are: *viveka*, the discernment between the real and unreal; *vairagya*, dispassion for the unreal; *sham-adi-shatka sampattih*, the acquisition of the six treasures—*shama*, control of the mind; *dama*, control of the sense-organs; *uparati*, withdrawal of the mind from the sense-objects; *titiksha*, forbearance; *shraddha*, faith in scriptures and guru, and sincerity of purpose;

samadhana, concentration of the mind; and finally an intense desire for liberation, *mumukshutva*.

2. Learning the Vedantic truths from a learned and realised teacher.

3. Knowing the truth for oneself by the three-fold practice of *shravana*, hearing with assimilation; *manana*, reflection; and *nididhyasana*, contemplation.

S: Now, tell me what are the practical implications of these Vedantic teachings to the individual and society?

R: This is a good question, Shyam. I shall answer it briefly.

- The fundamental principles forming the basis of the Hindu culture like Oneness and interconnectedness of all existence, unity in diversity, acceptance of all religions and cults are based on Vedanta.
- It is the only philosophy whose doctrines like the theory of evolution, the unity of energy and matter, the cyclical nature of creation, and so on are validated by modern science. Like science, it is rational, impersonal, universal, based on experience, and capable of replication by anyone. Hence, it is ideally placed to be the religion of the future.
- The ideal of service is based on the Advaitic dictum of ‘*Sarvam khalvidam Brahma*; everything is indeed Brahman.’⁵ Reiterating this idea, Swamiji said: ‘God is present in every Jiva; there is no other God besides that. “Who serves Jiva, serves God indeed”’.⁶
- At the individual level, it makes people pure, strong, confident, fearless, independent, and grants freedom from misery forever.

Hence, Swamiji said: “Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping



soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come, when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity’ (3.193).

Shyam: Thank you Ram for enlightening me on this vital subject.

Ram: It is alright. It is a pleasure speaking on Vedanta. Bye. 

References

1. Acharya Shankara, *Brahma-jnanavali-mala*, 20.
2. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 6.8.7.
3. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.4.10.
4. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 1.11.
5. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 3.14.1.
6. *Complete Works*, 7.247.