

# *dilip*

**REPRINT**

**Tat Tvam Asi:**

**Does it convey identity or difference?**

**Dr. R Saraswati Sainath**

*To get a copy of the issue or to subscribe to  
DILIP write to [dilipindia@gmail.com](mailto:dilipindia@gmail.com)*

Reprinted from DILIP APRIL-JUNE2019

---

Tat Tvam Asi:

## Does it convey identity or difference?

Dr. R Saraswati Sainath

---

INDIAN philosophical schools can be classified as either orthodox or heterodox, depending on their acceptance or denial of Vedic supremacy. Buddhism, Jainism and Sāṃkhya are heterodox whereas Mimāṃsā and Vedāntic schools are orthodox. Vedāntic schools are so called, because they deal with the subject matter of the Upaniṣads, which are the last sections (anta) of the Vedas. In addition to deriving their source ideas from the *Upaniṣads*, these Vedāntic schools draw support for their philosophies from the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Brahmasūtras*.<sup>1</sup> The *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavadgītā* and *Brahmasūtras* are collectively the triple foundation (prasthānatraya) of Vedāntic schools. Divergent interpretations of the triple foundation have given rise to the various Vedāntic schools. In addition to logically establishing their interpretation of the *prasthānatraya*, they criticise other Vedāntic schools. Debates among these schools have given rise to a rich polemical literature, enriching Vedāntic thought.

Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita are the three major Vedāntic schools. Śaṅkara's Advaita deals with monism, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita with qualified monism, and Madhva's Dvaita with dualism. For Śaṅkara, the Brahman of the Upaniṣads is pure consciousness bereft of any attributes and is identical with the soul (*jīva*). For Rāmānuja, Brahman is pure consciousness that is associated with all attributes and identified

with Lord Viṣṇu. The soul is a part of Brahman and dependent on Brahman, just as a limb is part of the body. For Madhva, however, Brahman—Lord Viṣṇu—is absolutely different from the soul; the soul in turn is absolutely dependent on Brahman at all times. Debates are much more vibrant between Advaita and Dvaita than between Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita.

Important statements from the Upaniṣads, that deal with the relation between Brahman and soul, are called “great statements” (mahāvākya), because each conveys a great meaning. In this paper, I will discuss one great statement (mahāvākya) TAT TVAM ASI, with its supporting illustrations from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, and present the divergent interpretations of Advaita and Dvaita.

The sixth chapter of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad,<sup>2</sup> called sadvidyāprakaraṇa describes Śvetaketu, the son of Uddālaka, returning from school. Noticing that he is conceited with pride of his knowledge, Uddālaka asks Śvetaketu whether he knows that entity, knowing which what is unheard becomes heard, what is unthought becomes thought of and what is unknown becomes known.<sup>3</sup> In short, knowing that entity would make it possible for him to know everything else. Śvetaketu replies by asking how knowledge of one entity can give rise to knowledge of all entities. Uddālaka uses an

- 
- 1 The Brahmasūtras are sets of aphorisms composed by sage Vyāsa. The number of these aphorisms varies according to each Vedāntic school. Preceptors sometimes either split or combine aphorisms to justify their interpretations. According to the Advaitic tradition, the Brahmasūtras are divided into four chapters: samanvaya, avirodha, sādhanā and phala. The first chapter seeks to establish Brahman as the “ultimate theme” of the Upaniṣads. The second seeks to establish that there is no internal contradiction regarding Brahman among the Upaniṣads. The third chapter deals with the means to attain Brahman and the fourth chapter with the result achieved of attaining Brahman.
  - 2 The Chāndogya Upaniṣad (Chānd. Up.), trans. Swāmi Swāhānandā (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1965).

analogy to explain. Knowledge of clay, gold, iron, or other materials leads to knowledge of everything that can be made from them; similarly, knowledge of that entity, the cause of the world, leads to knowledge of everything in the world.<sup>4</sup> Realizing his ignorance, Śvetaketu asks Uddālaka to teach him about that entity.

Uddālaka explains that in the beginning before creation there existed only one Being without a second. That Being thought “May I become many,” and created primordial elements and beings. Uddālaka further mentions that when people are said to be in deep sleep, they become united with that Being and thus have attained their own nature.<sup>5</sup> Uddālaka supports his teaching with the illustration of a bird and a string and mentions that that Being is subtle, all this world has that Being for its self, that Being is the absolute truth, it is the ātman and you are that Śvetaketu (sa ya eṣo’ñimaitadātmyamida sarvam tat satya sa ātmā tat tvam asi śvetaketo).<sup>6</sup> At the request of Śvetaketu, Uddālaka repeats his teaching with eight more illustrations, which make nine in all. In every illustration, he repeats the words TAT TVAM ASI.

According to Advaitins the Upaniṣads recognize one principle as Brahman. It is essentially free from any attributes (nirguṇabrahman) and is of the nature of existence (sat), consciousness (cit) and bliss (ānanda). At the time of creation, Brahman, the Being (sat), associates itself with māyā or avidyā—primordial ignorance—and cultivates in itself qualities such as omniscience and omnipotence. Brahman, endowed thus with all attributes (saguṇabrahman) is God (Īśvara). The same Brahman, when associates with the mind

(the offshoot of māyā) is the soul (jīva). Due to the influence of avidyā, however, the latter is ignorant of its true nature as Brahman and transmigrates. Īśvara, however, is ever aware of his essential nature.<sup>7</sup> A qualified aspirant, mind purified by ritualistic practices, hears the great instruction TAT TVAM ASI from his guru. He knows immediately that his self is different from his body but identical with Brahman.<sup>8</sup> He has attained the state of liberation while embodied (jīvanmukti). To put it another way, he is free from the superimposition of the body (aśarīratva). A self-realized person (jīvanmukta) is free from the cycles of transmigratory existence (saṃsāra). Though liberated, his body does not fall away at the dawn of self-realization; he continues to carry on his worldly activities. Once the karma that caused this birth is exhausted, he sheds his mortal coils.<sup>9</sup> After that he becomes one with the ubiquitous consciousness and has no need to reach a heavenly abode. This theory, liberation while embodied, is pivotal to Advaita. With this in mind, Advaitins interpret TAT TVAM ASI as the identity of Brahman and the jīva. Thus the word TAT refers to the Being, Brahman, TVAM to the self and ASI to the identity between TAT and TVAM.

But in the state of bondage, the soul has limited knowledge. How can it be identical with the omniscient and omnipotent God? Advaitins answer by pointing out that the word “that” (TAT) denotes consciousness in connection with qualities such as omniscience and omnipotence. The word “you” (TVAM) denotes consciousness in connection with limited knowledge. The word “are” (ASI) conveys an equation between these two. By partial secondary significance (jahadajahallakṣaṇā), it conveys an equation

3 Ibid., 6.1.3.

4 Ibid., 6.1.4-6.

5 Ibid., 6.8.1.

6 Ibid., 6.8.7.

7 Vedānta Paribhāṣā of Dharmarājādharīndra[VP], trans. Swami Mādhavānandā (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1993), 178.

8 Ibid., 207.

9 There are two kinds of karma: that which has been accumulated during countless births (sañcitakarma) and that which is earned in the present to produce results in the future (āgamikarma). One portion of the sañcitakarma is responsible for the current birth and has started producing results; this is prārabdhakarma. At the dawn of knowledge, sañcitakarma and āgamikarma are destroyed, whereas prārabdhakarma continues. The liberated soul continues to carry on his activities as a result of this prārabdhakarma. Once it is exhausted, his body falls away. He realises his unity with the ubiquitous Brahman and therefore no longer needs to reach the heavenly abodes. See Tattvabodha in Vedāntasandharbha (Mount Abu: Mahesh research Institute, 1989), 180. See also VP 225.

between only the substantive elements of TAT and TVAM, which is consciousness, and not the adjectival ones as well. The substantive elements are called as Brahman and ātman respectively. Thus, it is not contradictory to say that God (Brahman) and soul (ātman) are the same.<sup>10</sup>

For Madhva, however, Brahman in the Upaniṣads is Lord Viṣṇu. He has many attributes: omniscience, omnipotence, and so on. But he is free of any bad ones. In this sense, he is hailed as nirguṇabrahman. Avidyā is the wondrous power of Viṣṇu by which he creates, sustains, and destroys the universe. It is due to the same avidyā that he subjects the souls to transmigration. The soul is similar to Brahman but always different from and dependent on Brahman. It is this awareness of dependence on Brahman and consequent devotion to Brahman that leads a soul to liberation. Liberation means reaching Vaikuṇṭha, the abode of Lord Viṣṇu. Even there, in the state of liberation, souls maintain their difference from and dependence on Lord Viṣṇu.<sup>11</sup> For Madhva, therefore, TAT TVAM ASI refers not to sameness but to difference. Thus Madhva reads this statement as ATAT TVAM ASI, adding the “a” in the preceding word ātmā, and the result means that YOU ARE NOT BRAHMAN.<sup>12</sup>

The strong dispute between Advaitins and Dvaitins has enriched the polemical literature of both schools. The Dvaitins establish their theory of dualism to criticise the Advaitins, and the Advaitins reply by re-affirming Advaita. In his Viṣṇutattvavinirṇaya (VTN), for instance, Madhva interprets this mahāvākya in connection with the difference between God and soul. In his Advaitatattvasudhā (ATS),<sup>13</sup> Anantakṛṣṇaśāstri,

an Advaitin of recent times, refutes the Dvaitic view and re-establishes the Advaitic one. In this paper, I will present both views and assess each.

### First illustration

‘Just as a bird tied to a string, after flying in various directions and finding no resting place elsewhere, takes refuge at the very place whereto it is tied, even so, dear boy, that mind, after flying in various directions and finding no resting place elsewhere, takes refuge in Prāṇa alone<sup>14</sup>; for the mind, dear boy, is tied to Prāṇa.<sup>15</sup>...All these creatures dear boy, have Being as their root, have Being as their abode, and have Being as their support.<sup>16</sup>

### Dvaita interpretation

Just as there is difference between the string and the bird, there is difference between God and soul. God is the regulator of souls, moreover, in all three states (waking, dreaming and deep sleeping). In waking and dreaming, due to the influence of sense organs, the soul seeks worldly objects. As a result, being exhausted, by deep sleeping, the soul returns to God--his resort or ultimate destiny. In short, this example conveys the soul's dependence on God.<sup>17</sup> In this passage the word mind refers to jīva and the word prāṇa refers to God. God is called prāṇa since he directs all. In the passage all the beings arise from God designated as sat (i.e. all these creatures have being as their root) difference between God and jīva is stated.<sup>18</sup>

### Advaita Interpretation

Advaitins emphasize that liberation is nothing but attainment of one's own intrinsic bliss, which is attained here. The soul exists in three states--

10 VP 97-98.

11 See T.P. Ramachandran, Dvaita Vedānta (New Delhi: Arnold-Heildmann, 1976), 74-95.

12 na abhede kaścīdāgamāḥ | santi ca bhede sarvāgamāḥ. tathāhi atat tvam asi iti navakṛtvopadeśaḥ sadṛṣṭāntakaḥ. na cāyam abhedopadeśāḥ. Viṣṇutattvavinirṇaya of Madhva, trans. K.T.Pandurangi (Bangalore: Dvaita Vedanta Studies and Research Foundation, 1991), 90. Viṣṇutattvavinirṇaya of Madhva has been commented upon by Jayatīrtha. There are many sub-commentaries for this work. For this paper parts of Jayatīrtha's commentary as provided by K. T. Pandurangi are also consulted.

13 N.S. Anantakṛṣṇaśāstri, Advaitatattvasudhā, Vol. I (Delhi: Nag, 1986).

14 Swāhānanda mentions that the word prāṇa in the text stands for the highest principle described as Sat at the beginning of the chapter.

15 Chānd. Up., 6.8.2.

16 Ibid., 6.8.4

waking, dreaming, and deep sleeping—and, depending on the state, it is called as *viśva*, *taijasa*, and *prājña* respectively. In the waking state, the soul experiences the objects of the world with the aid of mind and sense organs. In the dreaming state, the gross sense organs do not operate. But the mind is active, and it projects objects with the help of subtle sense organs and on the basis of experiences during the waking state. While deep sleeping, however, even the mind lapses. Therefore, the soul experiences its intrinsically blissful nature. Due to ignorance, the soul is unable to realize it fully. After waking, however, it can remember this experience. The expression, “I slept happily, I did not know anything.” supports this idea about the *prājña*.<sup>19</sup> So does the illustration from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. While deep sleeping, the *jīva* (called *prājña*) retains its intrinsic nature of pure consciousness. The liberated soul remains in a similar state. The difference is that a *prājña* is subjected to *avidyā*, but a *jīvanmukta* is not. This illustration links the *prājña* metaphorically with the string and it links *taijasa* with the bird. It is the same *prājña*, pure consciousness, that experiences the objects of the world in the waking and dreaming states due to the external factor: mind. Although the difference between the string and the bird is real, what makes *prājña*, *taijasa*, and *visva* different from each other is only illusory.

According to *Anantakṛṣṇaśāstri*, therefore, the first illustration cited by the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* indicates that liberation is nothing but the realization of one's own intrinsic bliss—which the *prājña* experiences while deep sleeping—and is accessible in this world itself. The *śruti* text *atra brahmasamaśnute* clearly

mentions that Brahman can be experienced here itself. Such an experience can be justified only if the word TAT is taken as referring to the *nirguṇa brahman*. The essential nature of *jīva* is also pure consciousness and hence the true import of the *mahāvākya* TAT TVAM ASI is pure consciousness. Hence by this interpretation, the views that Brahman is essentially endowed with attributes and *mokṣa* is to be attained in world hereafter etc., also stands refuted.<sup>20</sup>

## Second illustration

As, dear boy, the bees make honey by collecting juices from different trees and reduce them into one essence, and there, as these juices have no such discrimination as “I am the juice of this tree, I am the juice of that tree” even so, dear boy, all these creatures having merged into Being, do not know, “We have merged into Being.” Whatever these creatures are here, tiger or lion or wolf or boar or worm or flying insect or gad-fly or mosquito, that they become again.”<sup>21</sup>

## Dvaita interpretation

The nectars of various flowers are put together, yet, are unaware of what makes them different from each other. In the same way, souls are within God but unaware of how they are different from God. Consequently, they are born as creatures. This example, too, tells about the difference between God and soul.<sup>22,23</sup>

## Advaita interpretation

The nectars from various trees are different from each other only as individual nectars. In other words, the difference exists only as long as the limiting adjunct (*upādhi*) of each tree exists.

17 *tatra jāgarasvapnayoḥ śarīrendriyamanasām itastataḥ vikṣepeṇa śrāntasya jīvasya śramāpanodāya svāpe parameśvarāśrayatāmabhidhāya tatra dṛṣṭāntaḥ ucyate sa yatha śakuniriti* | (VTN, 93).

18 VTN., 110-111.

19 See *Madhusūdana Sarasvatī. Siddhāntabindu*, trans. S.N. Sastri (Chennai: Adi Sankara Advaita Research Centre, 2006), 144-147.

20 *atra sūtrasthānam prājñaḥ ... .bāhyābhyantarabandhasatvāsattvābhyām suṣuptajāgaritādīnām viśeṣaḥ. tatra sūtrabaddhatvam śakunerātyantikabhedena, jīvātmanastūpahitasyupādheriva prājñena tādātmyāt bhedābhedānubhavopi. tathā ca kalpitam bhedamādāya dṛṣṭāntaḥ | ... "atra brahmasamaśnute" iti śrūtisiddho'treiva brahmabhāva eva mokṣaḥ | sa ca tatpadārthasya saviśeṣeikasvabhāvatāyām nopapadyate, iti nirviśeṣam brahmeiva tatpadārthaḥ, yadabhedo jīvasya tattvamasimahāvākyaatparyaviśaya iti sūcanadvārā tatvamasivākyaśākhaṇḍabrahmaparatvam jñāpyate, iti saviśeṣabrahmavādaḥ utkramanāpekṣabrahmasāmyamokṣatāvādaśca nirasto bhavati* | (ATS, 10).

21 *Chānd. Up.*, 6.9.2-3.

Once they merge to form honey, though, there is only one form of honey; the upādhi that they belonged to various trees vanishes, and so do the differences among them. The soul appears to be different from Brahman, similarly, only as long as upādhi such as body and mind exist. Once the upādhi vanishes, the notion of difference vanishes as well, and the realized soul experiences oneness with Brahman. In other words, liberation is the state of absolute unity with Brahman--free from any limiting adjuncts. The illustration mentions limiting adjuncts (tiger, wolf, and lion) in this sense only. For Advaitins, therefore, the illustration is about sameness and not difference.<sup>24</sup>

### Third Illustration

'These eastern rivers, dear boy, flow along to the east and the western ones to the west. They rise from the ocean and merge in the ocean and become that ocean itself. And there as these rivers do not know themselves as "I am this river, I am that river", even so, dear boy, all these creatures, having come from Being, do not know, "We have come from Being." And whatever these creatures were here, tiger or lion or wolf or boar or worm or fly or gad-fly or mosquito, that they become again.'<sup>25</sup>

### Dvaita interpretation

The second illustration referred to non-sentient entities. This one cites sentient beings as examples. The word "rivers" denotes the presiding deities of those rivers. Before joining the sea, each deity knows that "I am Gaṅgā" and

"I am Yamunā." But once they merge in with the sea, they lose that distinction. In the same way, souls who come from God do not know that they are different from God; they are born as tigers or wolves or other creatures due to their ignorance.<sup>26,27</sup>

### Advaita interpretation

Advaitins use the same interpretation for this illustration as they do for the second. The distinct feature of "riverness" exists only as long as the river does. Once it merges with the sea, it loses that "riverness." The soul feels its distinction from Brahman, similarly, only as long as the upādhi of selfhood (jīvātva) exists. Once the jīva merges with Brahman, it loses its selfhood. Likewise every river is distinct only depending upon its direction which is its upādhi and once they have merged into the sea they appear only as the sea. In the same way, the differences among jīvas are only due to their upādhis. In mokṣa all the jīvas lose their jīvātva and there does not exist even the notion of "I" in mokṣa. Therefore, this illustration supports the Advaita view.<sup>28</sup>

### Fourth illustration

'Of this large tree, dear boy, if anyone were to strike at the root, it would exude sap, though still living; if anyone were to strike in the middle, it would exude sap, though still living; if anyone were to strike at the top, it would exude sap, though still living. As that tree is pervaded by the living self, it stands firm drinking constantly and rejoicing. If the life leaves one branch of this tree, then that branch dries up, if it leaves the second

22 yathā te nānāvṛkṣarasāḥ tatra miśritāyām vidyamānamapi vivekam na labhante evameva imāḥ sarvāḥ prajāḥ jīvāḥ parameśvaraśaktibhīreva sve sve śārīre sati parameśvare sampatsya sati sampatsyāmahe iti na viduḥ | (VTN,95).

23 The first illustration pointed out that the jīvas are dependent on God and are regulated by Him and the second illustration points out that the jīvas are with God and are neither aware of Him nor their difference from Him. VTN., p. 95

24 atrāpi yadyapi nānāvṛkṣarasānām tattadvṛkṣarasatvenopādhinā bhedo vartate pratīyate ca tathāpi madhubhāvam prāptānām madhurūpātīrekena na rūpāntaram na vā tattadrasatvopādhiprayuktabhedanubhavasteṣām teṣām iti teneiva nyāyena yavattaccārīropādhisatvameva jivānām bhedaḥ, tadanubhavo vā, na tu brahmabhāvam prāptānām iti nirbhedasvarūpameva mokṣasvarūpam sati sampattirvetyevātra vivakṣaṇāt nātrāpi drṣṭānte bhedakathā. ato'tra "ta iha vyāghro vā simho vetyoupādhi kabhedaviraha eva suṣṭyādāviva muktau pratipadyate | (ATS, 10).

25 Chānd. Up., 6. 10. 1-2.

26 nadyāḥ gaṅgādyāḥ nadyabhimānidevatāḥ. tāḥ nadīdevatāḥ yathā tatra samudre iyam gaṅgā ahamasmi iyam tu yamunā ayam samudraḥ ityevam anyāḥ api na viduḥ. evam parameśvare sthitvāpi tam āśritaḥ sma iti na viduḥ | (J.T.) (VTN, 96).

27 Two points are made that the rivers that have joined the sea are together and the presiding deities of the rivers are sentient. Still they do not know the respective portions of the water. Similarly, the jīvas are with the God in the body. They are different from Him but are unaware of that difference. Ibid., 96.

one, then that dries up; if it leaves the whole tree, the whole tree dries up.<sup>29</sup>

### Dvaita interpretation

God is different from the soul. When the tree is pervaded by God, it functions and continues to exist even when attacked by weapons. Once God leaves the tree, it cannot function and dries up—even without being attacked by external weapons. In the same way, the jīva can function only as long as God is present inside and regulates it. Once God leaves the jīva, it cannot function. God regulates the jīva, and the jīva depends on God.<sup>30</sup>

### Advaita interpretation

Although at the outset there seems to be a difference between the jīva and the tree, the term tree connotes body and sense organs (kṣetra).<sup>31</sup> The inner self that pervades the tree represents the soul (kṣetraijña).<sup>32</sup> In other words, the body is

different from the self. The latter's true nature is pure consciousness, free from the limiting adjuncts of body, mind, and so on. The self, due to superimposition of the body and the latter's qualities, falsely identifies itself with the body, experiences misery, and is subjected to bondage. When these conditions vanish, the jīva is free from misery. In other words, someone who is free from the superimposition of body and sense organs is free from both attachment and misery. In other words when ajñāna gets destroyed, the notion of "I" also ceases in mukti and by this it stands clear that when the upādhi gets destroyed misery experienced by the jīva as a result of the upādhi also gets destroyed. Thus, the example, when the jīva leaves one "branch," that "branch" dries up. From this it is clear that the state of aśarīratva, absence of superimposition of one's body and sense organs upon the self, is due to the absence of attachments towards one's body and is not dependent on actions.<sup>33</sup>

**To be continued ■**

28 atrāpi yadyapi nadīsamudrayornadītvena samudratvena ca bhedo vartate tathāpi sa bhedaḥ kāryātmameiva na tu kāraṇātmanā ... nadītveneiva yathā samudre tallayaparyantam pratītiḥ evamatrāpi bandhāvasthāyām jīvātmameiva pratītiḥ ... yathā ca nadīnām tattaddigupādhibhedamātreneiva bhedaḥ svarūpatastu samudrātmameiva paramārthaḥ evam jīvanām parasparabhedopyupādhimātreneiva ...tena ca muktau nāhamiti pratītirapi sarveṣām jīvanām jīvatvamapi muktau nivartate ityadvaitasiddhānta evāsyāpi dr̥ṣṭāntasya svārasyaḥ || (ATS, 11).

29 Chānd. Up., 6.11.1-2.

30 yathā vṛkṣajīvasya īśvarānugrahe sati vighātiṣu bāhyakāraṇeṣu satsvapi avasthānam bhavati. kadācit īśvarānugrahābhāve bāhyakāraṇabalavatvābhāve'pi śarīraśoṣatyāgādyaṇiṣṭam bhavati evam manuṣaśarīrepi jīvasya īśādhīnatvam jñātavyam. jīvāpetam- jīvena harinā apetaḥ tyaktamidaḥ prāṇijātam | (VTN., 99).

31 It might be objected that sense organs are also part of the body and therefore need not be mentioned separately. But the sense organs are different from the body because the former have both the subtle elements and gross elements. After death, the gross sense organs are destroyed, but not the subtle ones. They travel with the soul to celestial worlds and occupy subsequent bodies which the soul takes depending upon its karma and are destroyed when the body dies after self-realization.

32 These two words, kṣetra for body and kṣetraijña for soul, are based on chapter 13 of the Bhagavad Gītā.