
UNIT 4 INTERPRETATION OF 'TAT-TVAM ASI'

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

- To see the basis and significance of advaitic philosophy.
- To see the relevance of 'Tat-tvam asi' for today.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Insightfully Sri Aurobindo wrote: "In liberation the individual soul realises itself as the One (that is yet Many). It may plunge into the one and merge or hide itself in its bosom—that is the laya of Advaita; it may feel its oneness and yet, as part of the Many that is the One, enjoy the Divine that is the Visistadvaitic liberation; it may lay stress on its Many aspect and go on playing with Krishna in the eternal Brindavan, that is the Dvaita liberation. Or it may, even being liberated remain in the Lila or Manifestation, or descend into it as often as it likes. The Divine is not bound by human philosophies—it is free in its play and free in its essence." In this unit we want to study Advaitic vision of Aurobindo, with the *mahavakya*, *Tat-tvam asi*. We also want to focus on its contemporary relevance for us.

4.2 TAT-TVAM ASI AND AUROBINDO

The actual test of a system in Indian religious thought is its capacity to grant liberation (*moksa*) to its followers. This test is inescapable and it is the difference between Western philosophy and Eastern philosophy. True love of wisdom which is the meaning of philosophy is to be had not in pursuing what is said to be truth but the wisdom that is life in freedom. Thus whatever secures freedom for the self is philosophy and not merely an intellectual edifice erected by the logic of the finite mind or bondage and called a systematic presentation of Reality in terms of the intellect.

Once this is grasped it naturally follows that Vedanta is not a mere intellectual construction nor a dialectical display of system but a profound search for the final liberation which alone would present a Vision (*darsana*) the Ultimate Reality. Such a *darsana* would not only be a synoptic Vision but an organic whole which could be called a harmony rather than a synthesis of standpoints. The many-sided nature of reality is well known but its oneness is also what is

perceived in a measure and in a sense even in our ordinary life but to reason and still more to our intuitive apprehension (Varadachari 2010).

Sri Aurobindo may be said to follow the great leaders of Vedanta in so far as he has through his original approach of yogic *anubhava* and *adhyatmic* (introspective meditative) approach sought to arrive at his own synthesis of the knowledge in the Veda, Upanishads and Gita. The threefold texts for Vedanta are recognised to be the Upanishads, Vedanta Sutras and the Gita. The Advaita approach claims to be based on the *anubhava* of oneness with the Ultimate Reality, that comes to one who has strenuously contemplated on the basic sentences or propositions of the scripture such as (i) *Tat tvam asi* (That thou art); (ii) *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am Brahman); *So'ham Asmi* (He or That am I); (iii) *Sarvamkhailvidam Brahma* (all this verily is Brahman), (iv) *Ekamevadvityam* (Only one without a second). It is obvious mere contemplation of Brahman passages such as the above will lead to realisation of the truths contained therein. What is necessary is the attainment of the Brahman through devotion and grace, as advocated by Sri Aurobindo.

4.3 BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF VEDANTA

Before we proceed to study the basic interpretation of *tat-tvam-asi* (That thou art), we shall see certain fundamental assumptions of all Vedantas as expounded by Pujya Dr. K.C. Varadachari (Varadachari 2010).

1. There is one and only One Supreme Being or Existence. This is absolutely distinct in a sense from all that are seen also to exist, which are not supreme, divisible, divided and having the nature of dependents on something else for their being and Nature.

1a. The Supreme principle which is One however sustains and supports and manifests and withdraws all the others.

1b. This Supreme Principle is Vastness as well as Minutest. It is thus the internal and external principle of all that is vast and minute.

1c. If we definitely assert that the Substance is that which is all and as such all are dependent on it, in the relation of attributes or modes or bodies, then there is Only One substance. All the rest are included in it.

2. That the Brahman can be known through a different method Of *Upasana* (devotional contemplation through knowledge) and not through mere reciting, reading of scriptures, or works or charity or alms-giving, or mere sacrifice.

2a. This is possible but one requires the grace of God, that arises through establishing mental peace (*prasada*) or silence that is spiritual.

2b. To say that to be an object of knowledge is to be also inconscient is not necessary. To emphasise subjective knowing of the object or intuitive knowing of it is not the same as the objectification of the subjective or mental states. Advaita of Mayavada accepts this axiom which is not axiomatic.

2c. Nor can it be said that to be a knower is the condition of all things at all times. This is the prerogative of the Supreme Brahman. Brahman is the Object of all souls for attainment of Him alone means liberation. Thus the Objectivity of God cannot be denied. Nor can it be said of the individual souls who have the dual capacity even like God of being objects of Grace of God and subjects of experience of Nature and God.

2d. The only question then is about the World or Nature or the Inconscient (*acit*). Its existence is said to be of the enjoyability or the enjoyable. It is in that sense objectivity. But it is never without the Godhead and as such it derives a subjectivity of a peculiar kind of being enjoyable to the Divine. This subjectivity cannot be derived from the acceptance of its being conscious or animated by consciousness or entelechies or monads or *jivas*. All the universe being considered to be thus a college of souls or an aggregate of them, at different levels of consciousness.

2e. Thus Nature seems to be accepted as a triple threaded force or energy of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* which undergoes the modifications for the embodiment of the souls in manifestation.

2f. It is possible that the threefoldness is a reflection or correspondence or degradation or grossening of the primal spiritual triplicity of *sat*, *cit* and *ananda*.

3. The transcendence of the Nature and mere isolated soul of souls is the goal of Being and the restoration of Reality to the soul as well as the restoration of the imbalance of Nature.

3a. This is by a Return or *nivritti* to God beyond or above manifestation.

3b. The Return is a withdrawal from the manifestation or the gross manifestation or even a subtle manifestation, for it is a return into God or Absolute Reality.

The renunciation of the relative Reality follows as a consequence or the renunciation of attachment to whatever is offered by relative realities or some of them for the sake of higher and freer enjoyment of others, or it is the enlightened divine way of enjoyment of manifestation as the body of God which has been offered as the field of enjoyment.

3c. The assertion of a world of enjoyment of unalloyed bliss beyond the world of karma such as the world of lower Nature is also the assertion of a transcendent way of enjoyment through God-knowledge rather than 'misery' (enjoyment with attached or selfish enjoyment of the soul).

Thus we find that the assumptions of the Vedanta point out to the necessity of a person for loving and attaining God or absolute Reality-status. This is the primary condition of all spiritual pursuit. All Vedantins accept that the moral and spiritual or yogic preparation is the sine qua non of spiritual ascent. The attainment of Brahman is a process of dedication or philosophy by which one grows into the being of Brahman. Thus the famous statement that one who knows Brahman attains Brahman. Being and Becoming become synonymous for the infinity of Being is such that it is a continuous becoming of oneself its Nature.

4.4 AUROBINDO'S ORGANIC CONCEPTION OF REALITY

Sri Aurobindo's organic conception through evolution gives concrete shape and meaning to the metaphysical form of the organic union presented by Sri Ramanuja. In this sense it is rich approach to the Divine by a direct plunge into the centre of our being or the heart. It is not

enough to realise that one is a part or ray or many of Brahman's Organism, but it is necessary also to grow into Him to be in a sense filled by Him and be born of Him. The Upanishads are not unaware of this birth of the soul of Brahman, of becoming filled with Brahman, or growing in the vastness of Brahman or moving in the Brahman according to the Supreme Law of Being (Varadachari 2010).

The logic of the mechanical or rectilinear logic is replaced by the dynamic logic of the Organic of growth, of ascent, of liberation and birth in Brahman, surpassing or transcending ignorance that is confined to the search for freedom in the dark interiors of it which are revealed by such concepts as realisation without ascent or transcendence which truly are possible without realising or ascending since all are *maya* or illusion or limitations on the unchanging and non-many or One.

Sri Aurobindo's exposition of the several *vidyas* show the absolute necessity for a dynamic conception of the Reality as a wonderful process of evolution which makes for the play of the Many in the One and of the One in the Many. The Lila is then not merely a mirage play or miracle play but a supreme Act of creative Delight which has been said to be the heart of Brahman. It is clear that Dvaita's supreme quality of differences together with the unifying doctrine of dependence lends itself to the play of the many in the One. The profound question would yet arise as to whether the many and the one are of equal status, in which case the many would not be the souls or atoms, but Brahman Himself.

Sri Aurobindo therefore considers that the Eternal One is also eternally many. This view is of course very basically different from the concept of many *antaryamins* (indwelling God) since there will be the identification of the souls which are in evolution and involution in different levels and planes with the inner spirit immortal in all on the one hand and on the other with the incarnating deity in the heart of the Devotees. This however explains the identity formula between the soul and God directly.

Sri Aurobindo's Vedanta, if we may so speak of his interpretation of the Upanishads metaphysically, realises the organic view as also the peculiar kind of *bhedabheda* (difference and non-difference) between the many and the one, not merely during the periods of creation and dissolution but eternally. There is a profound play of the two at all times, perhaps with the shift of poises when oneness is dominant and when manyness is dominant with perhaps an intermediating oneness-mannyness realising itself in all manifestation and liberation. This is shown by Prof Varadachari (2010).

The basic question is whether this approach to the Upanishads will yield the results of a coherent advaitic philosophy. The answer to this question will be that it is only actual *abhyasa* (practise) or *upasana* (sitting near in contemplation) of this profound psychological insight that will show that this view is right. Dialectical thought and mere interpretation based on finite logistics will fail to satisfy much less explain the profound seer-wisdom of the Vedic Rishis and the mystics of the South. One has to enter into the practice or *upasana*, and psychological opening into the Ultimate Reality by intuition will follow, as in the case of Sri Aurobindo. Thus, the intuition of the unity of the Creative principle with the reality of the Oneness-Mannyness is one of the most important discoveries of Sri Aurobindo. The further intuition that the above is the real amazing formula of the Vedic *Rishis* is of far-reaching importance. The formula that Sri Aurobindo has

given has wonderful efficacy in its capacity to explain almost all divergent facts of the different areas of human life and culture and growth (Varadachari 2010).

4.5 CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS

Our Indian tradition has confronted the problem of the One and the Many through affirming neither the One (monism) nor the Many (pluralism) but suggesting the One-in-the-Many (*advaita*).

Advaita has a vertical dimension: the Many are integrated in the One Absolute as totally dependent so that compared to the One Real the many are not real in the same way, but only dependently real. Ramanuja, for instance, will speak of the world as the body of God. Just as the body cannot exist apart from the atman or spirit and would disintegrate into its various material components, the world is totally dependent on the Absolute Atman. The Hindu philosophical tradition has mostly insisted on this vertical dependence. Only some more recent Hindu leaders have realized that the various constituents of the body, while absolutely dependent on the spirit, are also relatively dependent on each other. Such mutual interdependence can be an experience of equality and community (Amaladoss 2003).

There is a traditional story about the 8th century philosopher Sankara. His affirmation of the reality of the One Absolute is such as almost to deny the reality of the many and consider them illusory. He is considered a monist by most commentators, though this is denied by others. As he was walking along a narrow ridge in a rice field he encounters a low caste servant coming along the same ridge in the other direction and demands the right of way. The low caste person shames him by challenging him to show the basis for a hierarchy between two equally dependent and illusory beings. We shall try to show in the following pages how the vision of advaita can offer us an alternate principle to promote community and peace in a pluralistic and divided world of today.

Advaita in Its Origins

Historians speak of an axial period in the religious history of the world around the 6th century before the common era. The Upanishads had their origin in India during that period. Starting with a pluralistic phenomenal world their searching reflection leads them to its roots in one reality. The process is both cosmic and personal (Amaladoss 2003).

In *Kena Upanishad*, the One and the many are affirmed: but one has to see them as related – the many dependent on the One, who is both immanent and transcendent. “He moves and he moves not. He is far, and he is near. He is within all, and he is outside all. Who sees all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings, loses all fear. When a sage sees this great Unity and his Self has become all beings, what delusion and what sorrow can ever be near him?” Brahman, the inner reality of all things becomes the Self – the Atman.

This identification is explained in other Upanishads. In the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, the sage Varuna explains to his son Bhrigu Varuni the structure of his own being, leading him from the outer to the inner reality, from food to life, mind, reason and joy. “From joy all things have come, by joy they all live, and unto joy they all return.” In the *Katha Upanishad*, Yama, the god of death, tells Nachiketas: “Concealed in the heart of all beings is the Atman, the Spirit, the Self; smaller than the smallest atom, greater than the vast spaces. The man who surrenders his human will leaves

sorrows behind, and beholds the glory of the Atman by the grace of the Creator.” In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, Svetaketu, the seeker, is taught by his father. He is asked to put some salt into a glass of water. After the salt dissolves, the water is salty, but the salt cannot be recovered. The father then instructs the boy: “In the same way, O my son, you cannot see the Spirit. But in truth he is here. An invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality. That is Truth. Thou art That (*tatvamasi*). The *Mundaka Upanishad*, therefore, can sing: “He who knows all and sees all, and whose glory the universe shows, dwells as the Spirit of the divine city of Brahman in the region of the human heart... There the sun shines not, nor the moon, nor the stars; lightnings shine not there and much less earthly fire. From his light all these give light; and his radiance illumines all creation.” In the *Bhagavad Gita* a central text describes Arjuna’s vision of Krishna in his cosmic form. (Amaladoss 2003)

If the light of a thousand suns suddenly arose in the sky, that splendour might be compared to the radiance of the Supreme Spirit. And Arjuna saw in that radiance the whole universe in its variety, standing in a vast unity in the body of the God of gods (11:12-13). Krishna goes on to instruct Arjuna: “He who sees the Lord of all is ever the same in all that it, immortal in the field of mortality – he sees the truth. And when a man sees that the God in himself is the same God in all that is, he hurts not himself by hurting others. When a man sees that the infinity of various beings is abiding in the ONE, and is an evolution from the ONE, then he becomes one with Brahman” (13: 27-28, 30).

We have rapidly quoted a number of early texts. They speak a symbolic language and they need to be interpreted. They affirm a basic oneness of all being: Atman- Brahman. The One alone is really real, if one can say so. The many are dependent on the One and draw their reality and value from the One. Detaching ourselves from the many to attach ourselves to the One, we rediscover the many in the One. This advaitic vision, interpreted in various ways, has animated the Indian spiritual search to realize the Self. The world or Brahman is not cut off from the Atman or Self. Rather it acquires a new value. This value, however, has not always been appreciated in the course of history. While the vision was always there, the dominant *sadhana* or spiritual effort has been to renounce the many in the pursuit of the One. A distinction between the phenomenal (*vyavaharika*) and the transcendent (*paramartika*) worlds has also made it possible to accept an unequal and hierarchical social world characterized by caste-based feudal systems of social organization at the phenomenal level, while pursuing a holistic and integrative experience in the transcendent level. Even the Tantric schools which used the senses and the body more positively did not translate it in terms of social concern. The (Mahayana) Buddhists, denying the transcendental level, affirmed that *Nirvana* is *Samsara* and practised universal compassion. But such a social consciousness occurs in Hinduism only in the last (20th) century, influenced by great personalities like Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Aurobindo, Tagore, Gandhi, etc.

The Mediaeval Period

Nammalvar, a Vaishnavite poet of the early 10th century of the common era (c. 880-930) sings: We here and that man, this man and that other in-between, and that woman, this, those things, those woman, and that other, whoever, those people, and these, and these others in-between, this thing, that thing, and this other in-between , whichever, all things dying, these things others in-between, good things, bad things, things that were, that will be, being all of them he stands there. Ramanuja (1017-1137), the philosopher-theologian, who systemizes the Vaishnava doctrine will picture this as “the world as the body of God” (Amaladoss 2003).

Social Interpretation of *Tat Tvam Asi* in Modern Times

In the modern times we can focus on three national leaders with social and political awareness who are inspired by the Aurobindo and the advaitic vision in relating, not only to God, but also to the others and nature. Sri Narayana Guru struggled for the equality of all humans in a positive way, by educating and developing the 'so-called' low caste people. He affirmed the advaitic vision as guaranteeing the equality of all beings, human and other.

“One of caste, one of religion and one in God is man;

Of one womb, of one form; difference therein none.

Within a species, is it not, that offspring truly breed?”

The society of man thus viewed, to a single caste belongs. (*Jati Mimamsa*)

“All are of one Self-fraternity.

Such being the dictum to avow,

In such a light how can we take life,

And devoid of least pity go on to eat?

The non-killing vow is great indeed,

And, greater still, non-eating to observe;

All in all. Should we not say, Oh men of righteousness,

Even to this amounts the essence of all religions?” (*Jiva Karunya Panchakam*)

“A compassionate man without any vested interest works both day and night for the welfare of others. On the other hand, a selfish man, desirous of his own good, toils day and night and comes again and again to his frustration. What is known as that person, or this person, when carefully considered, is the one undifferentiated form of the primeval Self. Whatever one does for the happiness of one's own self should also include the happiness of others. What is good for one and might cause disaster to another is opposed to the unity of the Self. Those who grievously hurt others will bring upon themselves the pain of consequential hell-fire.” (*Atmopdesa Sathakam*, 23-25). The advaitic vision leads Sri Narayana Guru to affirm, not only human equality, but also non-killing and non-eating of animals.

Rabindranath Tagore sees God in the toiling other.

“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!

Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark

corner of a temple with doors all shut?

Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground
and where the path-maker is breaking stones.

He is with them in sun and in shower,
and his garment is covered with dust

Put off thy holy mantle and even like him
come down on the dusty soil.

Come Out of thy meditations and leave aside
thy flowers and incense!

What harm is there if thy clothes become
tattered and stained?

Meet him and stand by him in toil and
in sweat of thy brow.”

Another poem “I know thee as my God and stand apart” is also insightful.

I know thee as my God and stand apart --
I do not know thee as my own and come closer.
I know thee as my father and bow before thy feet --
I do not grasp thy hand as my friend's.

I stand not where thou comest down and ownest thyself as mine,
there to clasp thee to my heart and take thee as my comrade.

Thou art the Brother amongst my brothers, but I heed them not,
I divide not my earnings with them, thus sharing my all with thee.

In pleasure and in pain I stand not by the side of men,
and thus stand by thee. I shrink to give up my life,
and thus do not plunge into the great waters of life.

Mahatma Gandhi states, “I am endeavouring to see God through service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor down below, but in every one. “

“To me God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist... He transcends speech and reason... He is a personal God to those who need His personal presence. He is embodied to those who need His touch. He is the purest essence. He simply is to those who have faith. He is all things to all men. He is in us and yet above and beyond us...”

“Non-violence is a power which can be wielded equally by all children, young men and women or grown up people, provided they have a living faith in the God of Love and have therefore equal love for all mankind. When non-violence is accepted as the law of life it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts.”

“*Ahimsa* is a comprehensive principle. We are helpless mortals caught in the conflagration of *himsa*. The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Man cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward *himsa*. The very fact of his living-eating, drinking and moving about necessarily involves some *himsa*, destruction of life, be it ever so minute. A votary of *ahimsa* therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of *himsa*. He will be constantly growing in self-restraint and compassion, but he can never become entirely free from outward *himsa*.”

Gandhi’s *ahimsa* therefore applies to the whole of creation, not only to the humans. He also realizes how difficult it is in practice.

4.6 THE ADVAITA: AN ALTERNATE PERSPECTIVE

Going through these texts discussed above we can see a consistent vision of an Absolute that is transcendent, but also immanent. As immanent it can serve as the foundation for cosmic community. Creationism, wrongly understood, has led to the secularization of the cosmos. The world is perceived as material and mechanical. It becomes an object which humans can dominate and exploit. Among the humans themselves individualism becomes the norm. Combined with unbridled consumerism, it leads to competition and conflict over scarce resources (Amaladoss 2003).

The root of such conflicts is the absence of relationship and community. The ideology of liberal capitalism idolizes the individual, who instrumentalizes the others and creation for his/her own benefit. It is in this context that the advaitic vision provides an alternative way of looking at others and the cosmos. While the advaita of Ramanuja, seeing the world as the body of God, underlines the mutual interdependence of all things and their dependent relationship on God, the advaita of Sankara is considered by many (foreign and Indian scholars) as monistic reducing the world to *maya* or illusion. But other scholars have pointed out that illusion itself is phenomenal and only points to the relative reality of the world when compared to the absolute reality of the Absolute. The Nirguna Brahman (without qualities) manifests itself in Saguna Brahman (with qualities). These are two dimensions of the same Brahman, the latter rooted in the former. The many devotional hymns of Sankara show how he treasured his relationship with the Absolute, even if it be one-sided.

Professor Amaladoss (2003) suggests that such an advaitic vision is an answer to the problem of the One and the Many. The monists affirm the One and deny the many as illusory. The pluralists, like the Jains in India, affirm the Many and deny the One. The advaita suggests a middle way seeing the One in the Many. The many are different manifestations of the One. The many are limited by the mediating elements. They are also different from each other. But all of them are dependent on the One in being. It is like an artist expressing himself/herself in a plurality of products, all seeking to express the same basic idea. It is the artist who gives meaning to these different products. But these products have an existence of their own, though they are dependent on the creative artist. This is only an analogy since the many do not stand on their own but are dependent on the One for their very being. This oneness in being generates a sense of community which is more basic than the diversity in manifestation. An awareness of this community can obviate competition and conflict at the level of the many.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What is the Advaitic understanding of reality.

2) Give a detailed account of the relationship between Advaita philosophy and Aurobindo..

4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen the significance of the profound advaitic insight “tat-tvam asi” and its significance for contemporary society. Aurobindo’s interpretation has the potentiality to offer resources necessary for the promotion of peace and harmony among the humans and other creations through their relationship to the Absolute which he has successfully achieved.

4.8 KEY WORDS

Darsana: Literally 'seeing' or 'view', the Sanskrit word which most closely approximates the Western term 'philosophy.' Also one of six orthodox philosophical systems or viewpoints on the nature of reality and the release from bondage to karma.'

Upasana: *Upasana* in Sanskrit literally means "Sitting near" but normally the term is used in Hinduism to denote a prescribed method for approaching a Deity or God or getting close to a deity/deities.

Tat-tvam asi: *Tat Tvam Asi*, a Sanskrit sentence, translating variously to "Thou art that," "That thou art," "You are that," or "That you are," is one of the Mahavakyas (Grand Pronouncements) in Vedantic Hinduism. It originally occurs in the Chandogya Upanishad. The meaning of this saying is that the Self - in its original, pure, primordial state - is wholly or partially identifiable or identical with the Ultimate Reality that is the ground and origin of all phenomena. The knowledge that this is so characterizes the experience of liberation or salvation that accompanies the *Unio Mystica*.

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