

## Who Am I?

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*Just as rivers flowing to the ocean merge in it, losing their name and form, so the wise individual, freed from name and form, manifests the Divine. Do you identify with the drop of water or the water of the drop?*

An individual thinking him(her)self possessed of name and form, finite, mortal, limited, must be rescued from this ignorance. In actuality, one is a diamond, a precious jewel, not different from the Divine which one seeks. Kabīr said, "It makes me laugh to hear of a fish in water, athirst." Tukārām said, "I went in search of God and could not find him. Then, at last, I discovered that I the seeker was the sought; I was God, that which I was seeking."

According to Advaita Vedānta, the Self (*Ātman*) is one and non-dual. The pluralistic universe of an individual's day-to-day experience, which appears to one as real, is an illusory superimposition which is neither real nor unreal. This appearance is rooted in ignorance which conceals the real and projects the unreal. One's entire experience of life seems to involve differentiations like, "I am male, I am old, I am hungry, I am meditating, I am seeking liberation," and so on. These differentiations are based on the superimposition of one thing on another or the attributes of one thing on another due to ignorance.

If the Self is one and non-dual, what is the status of the world, what is the status of all this multiplicity, including myself – what I think I am and what I think the world is? If the Self and the world are non-dual, one and the same, then there is no reason to seek the Self (for there is nothing that it is not). Yet, if that is the case, why am I miserable and happy, by turns? That seems to imply duality. On the other hand, if the world and the Self are different, then surely that is duality.

Generally, the human being directs all one's thoughts, actions, everything, outwards. To turn within is the first requirement regarding the question, "Who am I?" An individual whose attention is turned outwards, by that very act, excludes any possibility of discovering who he or she really is.

All human beings are on a journey, as it were, the journey of life. At some stage each individual suddenly becomes aware of someone or something missing. Each person thinks, "there must be more to life than this." Thus begins the search to discover if there is someone or something which can bring fulfillment, which can render one's incompleteness, complete. But, at this stage, one does not know who or what it is or even if it really exists. Some people just give up at this stage and discontinue their search for ultimate, eternal, unceasing bliss and settle for momentary pleasures and pains. Others begin to notice their sufferings and feelings of incompleteness and begin to search for a solution. A wise person or teacher enters the scene and reveals that Brahman is living/exists. (This is indirect knowledge). This wise person then reveals that you are that Brahman. (Direct knowledge.) This knowledge immediately destroys the individual's sense of fear, finitude, sorrow, and mortality. At the same time, the individual experiences ineffable bliss which arises from one's own innermost Self.

The mark of this ocean of consciousness is that it always exists and it exists by and in itself.

It is totally independent, neither needing effort nor support for its existence. To seek it within oneself, all that is necessary is to understand who or what is doing the seeking. One's habitual pattern is to go in search of it as if it were just another object, even if it is the greatest and grandest object of all. But that is precisely the problem.

The only thing that one knows for certain, with absolute certainty, is the fact that "I Am." Nothing else has this certainty. But the problem is, one does not know *who* this "I Am" is. Are you the physical body or is it you who has the body? Do you know the body or does the body know you? Be clearly aware that the body is an object and that you who knows of, and can observe, the body are quite apart from it. You pervade the entire body and are aware of every part of it but it does not know you. Even the feeling that you have a particular name and form belongs only to the mind. You, the knower of the body and the mind, are apart from both.

You are That, that Reality which cannot have a seer to see it as an object. That, which remains after all knowledge and all ignorance has vanished. You are That reality where all that is illusory has been absorbed; where the duality of a "Thou" and a "That" cannot survive. When the source of consciousness has been reached, consciousness disappears. Then, the source of consciousness and all that appears within consciousness is the Self.

A Great Saying (*mahāvākya*) is an identity statement which reveals the non-duality of the Absolute (*Brahman*) and the individual (*Ātman*). How can there be any understanding of this statement so long as the identification with the body as a separate entity exists? Or of the statement that others are not different from oneself?

Who is the "me" who is going to have this understanding? If the one who wants to "achieve" this understanding is none other than the "me" or "ego" or the mind, it cannot be achieved. The thief cannot become a policeman to catch the thief. The mind cannot destroy the mind. The mind or me is a creation within space and time, and it is only that kind of understanding which is not of space and time that can destroy the timebound mind or ego.

The *mahāvākya* "*tat tvam asi*" – "That thou art," appears nine times in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (VI.8.7—VI.16.3). Advaita contends that the individual soul is nothing but pure consciousness which appears not by itself but in association with the psycho-physical apparatus. This association is but an illusory appearance due to ignorance. In the statement "That thou art," "That" refers to Pure Consciousness.

Note that an understanding of a *mahāvākya* involves a two-fold benefit. Even in an empirical statement which involves grammatical co-ordination, there is this two-fold benefit. For instance, in the statement, "blue lotus," both the color "blue" and the flower "lotus" benefit. The idea of "blueness" removes all other possible colors from the lotus and "that" which is blue is precisely a "lotus." Thus, each is enriched and benefits from their association. In a similar manner, *tat*, by its association with *tvam*, removes the misconception that it is remote, unattainable, hidden, etc., and reveals itself as that which is ever-manifest, immediate, direct, and the innermost Self. Likewise, *tvam*, in its association with *tat*, removes the misconception that it is mortal, finite, bound, and imperfect and reveals itself as that which is self-existent, ever-pure, ever-free, and immortal. Thus, what was conceived of as the farthest of the far is revealed as nearer than the nearest; what appeared to be unattainable is already attained; what is ever hidden is really self-manifest.