

# The Significance of the Mahavakyas

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## Introduction

**B**EFORE SPEAKING ABOUT the deep meaning of the *mahavakyas*, the ‘great sayings’ of the Upanishads, I thought it would be helpful to remind ourselves that there is nothing absolute about the designation of the four standard Upanishadic verses as ‘great sayings’ or *mahavakyas*. That is to say, we should not expect to find an original red-lined version of the Upanishads with these four verses highlighted and raised to a special philosophical status. For one thing, we know that the early tradition was an oral tradition, handed down from teacher to student. Furthermore, it is not known with much certainty why or when these four verses, out of the many thousands of verses of the Upanishads, were designated *mahavakyas*.

The verses in question, at least according to the Advaitic tradition, are: *aham brahmasmi*, *tat tvam asi*, *ayam atma brahma*, and *prajnanam brahma*. What we do know is that they were chosen by Acharya Shankara to represent mantras attached to the four *mathas*, spiritual centres, in the four corners of India, each of the four taken from one of the four Vedas. Thus, we find that: ‘*Aham brahmasmi*; I am Brahman’<sup>1</sup> of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Yajur Veda, is connected with the Shringeri Pitha; ‘*Tat tvam asi*; Thou art That’<sup>2</sup> of the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, Sama Veda, with the Dvaraka Pitha; ‘*Ayam atma brahma*; This Self is Brahman’<sup>3</sup> of *Mandukya*

*Upanishad*, Atharva Veda, with the Jyotirmatha Pitha; and ‘*Prajnanam brahma*; Brahman is pure consciousness’<sup>4</sup> of *Aitareya Upanishad*, Rig Veda, with the Govardhana Pitha.

It is probably due to the tremendous influence of Acharya Shankara that these four mantras are now considered by many to be the authentic *mahavakyas*, but when did the designation become more or less ‘official’ does not seem to be known. What we do know is that these four mantras not only represent some of the most important teachings of the Upanishads, but also are guidelines for the sannyasi who belong to the various *sampradayas* of the *Dashanami* Orders founded by Acharya Shankara.

Despite the historical uncertainty regarding the origin of the *mahavakyas*, we cannot deny the wonderful philosophical and spiritual significance of these four statements—the first three dealing with the ultimate oneness of the individual Self, or *jivatman*, and the supreme Reality or Brahman, while the fourth one dealing with the nature of Brahman as pure consciousness. Each of the four speaks to the essential teaching of Advaita Vedanta: the apparent individual self is none other than the supreme Reality, covered with a veil of ignorance or *maya*.

## Philosophical Significance of the Mahavakyas

One of the reasons we have spent so much time on the connection between the *mahavakyas* and Acharya Shankara is that it has become almost impossible at present for Advaitins to analyse

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the meaning of these sayings without referring to some of the main tenets of Advaita Vedanta as laid down by Acharya Shankara. The final and absolute identity between the jivatman and Brahman, based on the concepts of *upadhi*, limiting adjunct, and *adhyasa*, false superimposition, has become almost sacrosanct in Advaitic circles. The *mahavakya*, '*tat tvam asi*' has reached the level of a perfectly formulated mathematical equation.

In fact, there is such a pristine purity to the *mahavakyas* as understood today that either we forget to look at the actual context in which they are uttered in the Upanishads, or simply find it unnecessary. Nevertheless, it is instructive to view the *mahavakyas* in both ways, namely as statements of universal truth, eternal, unchanging, pristine in their philosophical purity, and also as belonging to the highly allegorical, poetic, symbolic world of the Upanishads, where Brahman itself can be found lonely and wishing for companionship in one of the most beautiful sections of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*. The former analysis gives us a feeling of absoluteness and finality, while the Upanishads present us with a highly nuanced and complex interpretation of the *mahavakyas* and reveal to us the importance of the mysterious and unknowable in our understanding of the cosmos. And both interpretations have much to teach us.

### **The Basics of Advaita Vedanta**

The position of the traditional Advaitic school of Acharya Shankara is well known and often summarised in the famous 'half verse': 'Brahman alone is real, the one absolute reality, *brahma satyam*; the world is unreal, false, or insubstantial, *jagat mithya*; and the individual soul is none other than Brahman, *jivah brahma eva na aparah*.'<sup>5</sup> The *mahavakyas*, at least the first three mentioned above, speak directly to the oneness of the individual soul and the supreme Soul,



Shringeri Pitha, Karnataka

while the fourth, *prajnanam brahma*, explains the nature of Brahman. It is interesting to note that none of the four *mahavakyas* touches on the unreal nature of the world.

The one verse that we might have expected to make the list of the four *mahavakyas*, especially since the first three have virtually identical meanings, is '*sarvam khalu idam brahma*; all this is verily Brahman.'<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it is too realistic in its meaning and not in keeping with the 'falseness' of the universe. Or possibly, Acharya Shankara simply wanted to stress the reality of Brahman and its oneness with the jiva for the new monastic orders he had established. And, in fact, a case may be made that the first and third of these three Advaitic principles, namely the reality of Brahman and its oneness with the individual soul, are more defining features of Vedanta than the metaphysical status of the universe. Furthermore, the so-called 'falseness' of the world is clearly not as easily substantiated by the teachings of the Upanishads as the other two.

As mentioned earlier, there is a kind of mathematical purity to the explanation of the oneness of the individual soul and the supreme Soul. The interpretation turns on the relationship between the substantial or primary aspects of Brahman and jiva and the superficial or secondary attributes. Put quite simply, if we remove the

non-essential aspects of each, we find that there is nothing left that can be used to distinguish one from the other. And we are free to eliminate these secondary attributes, *upadhis*, not simply because they are non-essential, but more importantly because they do not belong to them.

The Advaitins utilise numerous examples to drive this point home. The redness we see in the crystal when a red rose is placed behind it really belongs to the rose, not the crystal. If some sort of transference of attributes had actually taken place, the redness would remain as the attribute of the crystal even after the rose is removed. But of course, the crystal reassumes its pure, colourless state as soon as the rose is gone. In the same way, the coverings of the jiva, often explained with the help of the *pancha-kosha* doctrine, do not really belong to it. Their elimination is more a question of removing our false sense of identity with them. Still, their removal leaves us with the same pure consciousness that forms the reality of Brahman. And if we eliminate the cosmic or creative aspect of Brahman, we are left with perfect identity between the two, '*ayam atma brahma*'.

### **The Uncompromising Path of Jnana Yoga**

The main criticism of such a doctrine, aside from counterarguments by the dualists, is that there is something cold and 'bloodless' about the impersonal, absolute Brahman posited here. This is a feeling Swami Vivekananda had after reading the philosophy of Kant, Hegel, and other German philosophers. S Radhakrishnan extended that to Acharya Shankara's *nirguna* Brahman, referring to it as a 'bloodless Absolute, dark with the excess of light'.<sup>7</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna was somewhat kinder, calling the path of Advaitic knowledge a little 'dry'. Regardless of what we think about Acharya Shankara's interpretation, when we examine the *mahavakyas* as we find them expressed within

the Upanishads themselves, we find nothing dry about them at all, compared to which the Brahman of Advaita Vedanta may not be 'bloodless', but is certainly a bit anaemic. Or we might say, in the words of Sri Ramakrishna, with the standard Advaitic interpretation, we are getting the flesh of the bel fruit but not necessarily the full weight.

On the other hand, the Upanishadic Brahman sometimes appears as pure Being and sometimes as a great Being, the infinite absolute as well as a more personal concept of God: brooding, meditating, creating and expanding, magical and mystical, and even thrilling, in its breadth and intensity. And here, the context in which we find the *mahavakyas* expressed is of special interest, as opposed to the formulaic and mathematical shape they take in the hands of the Advaitic philosophers.

So, we will examine the *mahavakyas*, not simply from the point of view of philosophy, but through the poetry of the Upanishads. Ultimately, we will find no real contradiction between these two views. But I want to show the 'full-blooded' version of Brahman and Atman, as well as the pristine version, so that we can get a glimpse into the vast vision and mystical insight of the Vedic seers who composed the Upanishads, so that we can, to borrow a favourite phrase of Sri Ramakrishna, get the 'total weight of the bel-fruit'.<sup>8</sup>

### **'Prajnanam Brahma; Brahman is Pure Consciousness'**

The first of the *mahavakyas* that we will look at is from the *Aitareya Upanishad*, Rig Veda. It is the only one of the four that does not speak directly of the oneness of Brahman and the Self, but rather explains the nature of Brahman as pure consciousness. The section that contains these words begins with the question: 'What is that Self, which we worship?'<sup>9</sup> And as part of the reply, we find that

this Self, or absolute Reality, is identified with all the gods, all the elements, all creatures. 'All this is guided by consciousness, *prajnanam*, is ordered by consciousness. The ground of the universe is consciousness. Consciousness is Brahman' (3.1.3).

This is our first hint that pure consciousness is something more than we may think it is, for it forms the source and ground of the entire universe. It is the guiding force behind the creation of all living beings and dwells within all sentient beings as the inner guide and controller. Thus, we can say that Brahman, in addition to being pure consciousness, is also, when conditioned by the attributes of intelligence and the power of projection, one and the same as *ishvara*, the creator.

### **'Aham Brahmasmi; I am Brahman'**

The second *mahavakya* that we will examine is found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and is repeated twice. The context in which the statement is uttered is very interesting. The claim is made in the previous verse that through *brahma-vidya* we shall become 'all'. Ordinarily, we would assume the compound *brahma-vidya* means 'knowledge of Brahman'. But here it seems to mean 'the knowledge that Brahman itself possesses', for the question is asked: 'What exactly is that knowledge which Brahman possessed that allowed Brahman to become "all"?'<sup>10</sup> In reply we learn that it was the knowledge, 'I am Brahman' that allowed Brahman to become all. Then it is explained that the gods also became 'all' through that knowledge, as did the saints and sages. And whoever, in like manner, knows oneself as 'I am Brahman', becomes all this, that is, attains to some kind of state of oneness with all beings and the universe. Even the gods cannot prevent this realisation, for such a person has become their Self as well.

This verse is then followed by nearly twenty pages of commentary by Acharya Shankara,



Dwaraka Pitha, Gujarat

showing how significant he considers these verses to be. But aside from the importance of the identity of the individual Self and Brahman, we find two crucial, though perhaps secondary, ideas. The first is that Brahman somehow becomes Brahman by having this knowledge of oneness, that Brahman is thought of in both a *nirguna* and *saguna* sense, capable of 'thinking' in a way not substantially different from the way the devas and human beings think, who were also considered qualified to understand 'I am Brahman'.

The second interesting idea is one that seems to remain just slightly beneath the surface in most of these Upanishadic verses, and which we also saw in the previous *mahavakya*, namely the ultimate oneness between Brahman and the 'all', which presumably includes the entire universe and its living beings. So, the emphasis in these verses is not only on a knowledge that leads to liberation or enlightenment, but also on one that expands one's sense of Self to a feeling of oneness with the entire universe. This association between Brahman and expansiveness can be understood simply by analysing the term 'Brahman', which is derived from the root *brhm* meaning 'to expand'. For the early Vedic seers, the sense of vastness, expansiveness, all-inclusiveness must have formed an important element in their understanding of Brahman and the universe.



### **'Ayam Atma Brahma; This Self is Brahman'**

The third *mahavakya* we will look at is from the *Mandukya Upanishad*. This Upanishad is the most purely philosophical of all the major Upanishads, so we should not expect to see Brahman presented in any allegorical or symbolic way. The Upanishad deals mainly with the three states of consciousness, waking, dream, and dreamless sleep, as well as the 'fourth', which transcends all three. It explains the true nature of the Self as the witnessing consciousness present throughout all of the various states of consciousness. And yet, even here, we find the same underlying, sometimes overlooked, theme of the Upanishads, namely that Brahman manifests as the universe, for the Upanishad begins with the words, '*om iti etad aksharam idam sarvam*'; the syllable Om is the entire visible universe'.<sup>11</sup>

The *mahavakya* itself, found in the following verse, '*Ayam atma brahma*; all this is Brahman', is preceded by the phrase '*Sarvam hi etad brahma*; all this is indeed Brahman'. None of this, of course, takes away from the principal meaning of the *mahavakya* as indicating the ultimate oneness of Brahman and Atman, but it does hint at the idea of the universe as more of a manifestation of Brahman than an illusory misreading of Brahman.

### **'Tat Tvam Asi; Thou art That'**

We now come to the last of the *mahavakyas*, the famous '*tat tvam asi*' of the *Chhandogya Upanishad*. It is first found in seventh verse of the eighth section of the sixth chapter of the Upanishad and is repeated at the end of each short section for the following seven sections. But the high Vedantic truths that are taught to the young Shvetaketu begin quite a bit earlier and are some of the most beautiful and profound teachings found in the Upanishads.

When we read them, we are reminded that the Upanishads are as much poetry as philosophy, beautiful imagery and allegory, not always meant to be taken literally, for, as we saw earlier, the authors were *kavis*, poets, and mystics, divinely inspired and filled with God. They were not merely philosophers and intellectuals. We will devote the majority of our attention to this last *mahavakya*, since it is the final teaching in this rich, colourful, and insightful section of the Upanishad.

We begin with the story of Shvetaketu, the blessed soul who was given the great teaching 'You are That'. Shvetaketu was the young son of a brahmana named Uddalaka Aruni. When the boy reached the age of twelve, his father explained to him the tradition of *brahmacharya* and how all in his family line had followed that tradition. So, Shvetaketu left home and spent the next twelve years leading a life of *brahmacharya*, studying with a qualified teacher, serving him in his forest retreat, and learning the Vedic scriptures from him.

At the end of twelve years, Shvetaketu returned to his father, Uddalaka. His father at once noted his high opinion of himself, as if he knew everything. He saw his arrogance and conceit and wanted to cure him of it. So, the father asked his son, Shvetaketu: 'My son, since you now think you know all that is to be known, surely you must know that by which one hears what cannot be heard, by which one perceives what cannot be perceived, and by which one knows what cannot be known. Did not your guru teach you that?'<sup>12</sup>

At this, Shvetaketu became humble and admitted that he neither was instructed in such knowledge nor knew the answer to such a strange question. He asked his father to explain it to him, and the rest of the sixth chapter represents his answer to his son. These teachings of Uddalaka to Shvetaketu represent the mystical heights of Vedantic thought regarding the real nature of reality and the Self. They can be broken

down into two distinct sections: the teachings regarding the nature of reality, or Brahman, with some very early ideas about creation, and then the final truth, the identity of that Reality with the Self within all beings.

Shvetaketu begins the dialogue by half wondering aloud about his father's statement. How is it possible to know that which is unknown, hear that which is unheard, see that which is unseen? For everything he had been taught belonged to the realm of lower knowledge, that is, knowledge gained through the senses or through inference, including even the knowledge of the Vedas. So he asks his father to explain, and Uddalaka gives a very beautiful reply regarding the nature of ultimate reality or Brahman, which he calls *sat*, Being or absolute Existence.

From his words we often get the impression that this *sat* is not simply the pure consciousness of Vedanta, but a great and powerful being that is responsible for the creation of the universe. He explains:

Why, in this way, my boy: by knowing the nature of one lump of clay, we can know the nature of everything made of clay, can we not? The shapes of other things, such as a pot, a toy elephant, and so on, are just names, given to help us talk about them. The reality in them is just the clay, is it not? ... By knowing the nature of a nugget of gold, the nature of all gold things is known; likewise, by knowing the nature of a nail file, we understand everything made of iron. The shapes and names we use for convenience. The reality is just the gold or the iron (6.1.4–6).

Then Shvetaketu replies: 'This is something new. Surely, my teachers did not know this. Otherwise they would have taught it to me. Please explain further' (6.1.7). Then Uddalaka explains the nature of creation, which is in reality nothing but Brahman manifesting as the visible universe, through a process of evolution of the elements. 'In the beginning there was nothing



Jyotirmatha Pitha, Uttarakhand

but Being alone, one without a second, undifferentiated. Some claim that there was non-being, but how can something arise out of nothing? There had to be being' (6.2.1, 2).

Then we find the wonderful allegory, which we also find in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*: That great Being, *sat*, 'looked around'. Perhaps it saw that there was nothing other than itself. Perhaps it felt lonely and had a desire to become manifest, and so thought to itself '*bahu syam*; may I be many', '*prajayeya*; may I grow forth; may I propagate, generate, create offspring' (6.2.3). Thus began the process of evolution.

It was not that the universe came into being at that very thought of creation, though that is also one theory, just as the dream world manifests instantaneously and fully formed. But here, the manifestation begins with the elements, the first being fire. And 'fire' also looked around and thought, 'May I be many; may I propagate' (6.2.3). And it created water. And the water looked around and thought, 'May I be many; may I propagate' (6.2.4). And it created *anna*, food or earth. Then that being looked around and thought, 'Let me enter into these three deities, elements—fire, water, and earth—by means of this living self' (6.3.2). Then that great being entered into them and with the help of name and form manifested this visible universe.

The remaining portion of this first section explains how these three elements evolve and account for all of creation.

Now, we come to the more famous portion of this chapter, the ‘*tat tvam asi*’ section. And we find that it is also far more interesting and challenging than what we might expect from later interpretations of ‘*tat tvam asi*’. It is not that we find anything to contradict what we see in the Advaitic interpretations of Acharya Shankara, but nevertheless, we are introduced to a fuller, richer, and certainly more poetic version of the same truth. And the mere fact that so many different illustrations are given to explain this truth is an indication of the subtle nature of this teaching. At the end of each illustration is the line: ‘*Sa yah esha anima etat atmyam idam sarvam tat satyam sa atma tat tvam asi shvetaketu*’; that which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is the Truth; that is the Atman; and you are that, O Shvetaketu’ (6.8.7). Immediately after hearing this, Shvetaketu, quite understandably, requests his father to explain further, and we begin to get a series of analogies and illustrations.

### **Analogies to Explain the Self**

Since Shvetaketu had requested his father to explain further, we get a variety of illustrations helping to explain what he means. Each time Shvetaketu asks for more explanations, we get the same words repeated verbatim, with a slight change the final time. The first instance comes after a discussion regarding sleep. Uddalaka says that when we are in deep sleep, the individual is merged in Brahman. Then he explains:

Just as bees make honey by collecting juices, *rasa*, the essential portion, from various trees and reduce them into one essential juice; and just as the individual juices have no ability to discriminate, making a statement as, ‘I am the juice that came from this tree, or I am the juice that came from

that tree’, even so, my dear child, all these created beings, having merged into that great Being, *sat*, [at the time of deep sleep, or at the time of dissolution of the universe] do not realise it and cannot say, ‘We have merged’. Whether they be lions or tigers, wolves, boars, worms, flies, gnats, or mosquitoes, they become that again [after waking or after the new cycle begins] (6.9.1–3).

After Shvetaketu asks, ‘Please explain further’, we get the next illustration (6.9.4):

These rivers all flow, my dear child, the eastern ones to the east, and the western ones to the west. They arise from the sea through evaporation and again rain and flow into the sea. They cannot then say, ‘I am this river or I am that river’. Even so, my child, all these created beings, though they come from *sat*, cannot say: ‘We have emerged from *sat*.’ Then he repeats the line from the earlier example: ‘Whether they be lions or tigers, wolves, boars, worms, flies, gnats, or mosquitoes, they become that again [after waking]. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and thou art that, O Shvetaketu’ (6.10.2).

Next illustration:

If, my dear child, someone were to strike at the root of this large tree here, it would bleed, that is, sap would ooze out, but live. If one were to strike at the middle, it would bleed, but live. If one were to strike at the top, it would bleed but live. Pervaded by the living self, that tree stands firm, drinking in again and again its nourishment and rejoicing. But if the living self leaves one of its branches, that branch withers; if it leaves a second one, that branch withers, and if it leaves a third one, that branch also withers. If it leaves the whole tree, that whole tree withers. My dear child, in exactly the same way, know that this body will die when that living self departs, but the living self does not die. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that



is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and thou art that, O Shvetaketu (6.11.1-3).

Next illustration: Uddalaka says to Shvetaketu: 'Bring me a fruit from that banyan tree.' 'Here it is, sir.' 'Break it open.' 'It is broken, sir.' 'What do you see there?' 'Seeds, small like tiny particles.' 'Break one open, my child.' 'It is broken, sir.' 'What do you see there?' 'Nothing at all, sir.' 'That subtle essence, my child, which you do not perceive, from that very essence this huge banyan tree has arisen. Have faith, my child. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and thou art that, O Shvetaketu' (6.12.1-3).

Next illustration: Uddalaka says: 'Pour this salt in water and then come to me in the morning.' The son did as he was told. His father said to him: 'Bring me the salt which you placed in the water last night.' The son searched for it but could not find it, since it had completely dissolved. The father said: 'My child, take a sip of water from the top. How does it taste?' 'It tastes salty.' 'Take a sip from the bottom. How does it taste?' 'It tastes salty.' 'Throw it away and then come back here.' Then Shvetaketu did as he was told, saying: 'The salt was present the whole time.' Then Uddalaka said: 'Here also, my dear child, you do not perceive *sat*, but it is nevertheless ever present. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and you are that, O Shvetaketu' (6.13.1-3).

Next illustration:

My child, suppose some robbers have blindfolded a man and removed him from his home in the Gandhara region, and have left him in a desolate place. And suppose he shouts in all directions: 'I have been brought here and left blindfolded; I have been brought here and left blindfolded.' Again, suppose someone comes and removes his blindfold and tells him, 'The



Govardhana Pitha, Puri

Gandhara region is that way; proceed in that direction', and he, using his commonsense goes from village to village and getting further instructions, finally reaches his home. Even so, does a person who has found a spiritual guide obtain true knowledge. His delay [in attaining final liberation] will last only as long as the body lasts; then he will attain perfection [will become merged in Being]. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and you are that, O Shvetaketu (6.14.1-3).

Next illustration:

My child, the relatives of a person who is about to die gather round him and ask, 'Can you recognise me; can you recognise me?' As long as the person's speech is not merged in the mind, the mind in the prana, the prana in fire, and fire in the supreme deity, so long does that person know them. But when that person's speech is merged in the mind, the mind in the prana, the prana in fire, and fire in the supreme deity, then that person does not know them. That which is the *anima*, the subtle essence, the entire world has that as its real nature; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and you are that, O Shvetaketu (6.15.1-3).

Next and the last illustration. This refers to an early belief regarding truthfulness and how



to judge whether or not someone has spoken the truth.

My child, they [the king's ministers or the police] grab a man by the hand and bring him to be judged, saying, 'He has stolen something; he has committed robbery. Heat an axe for him to touch.' If he has committed the robbery but does not admit it, he is a liar. His hand will be burnt when he touches the hot axe. This will prove his guilt and he will be punished or killed. But if he has not committed the robbery, then he will be protected by truth. When he touches the hot axe, he will not be burnt, and he will be released. Just as the truthful man is not burnt by touching the heated axe, such is the case with the liberated person. The entire world has its real nature in that; that is Truth; that is the Atman, Self; and you are that, O Shvetaketu (6.16.1-3).

This time Shvetaketu understands the teaching and the chapter ends.

### Conclusion

Now, what are we to make of all this? First of all, we must admit that this section is extremely difficult to fully understand, especially the '*tat tvam asi*' portion. It is certainly not what we might expect if we had only heard of this *mahavakya* as a simple Advaitic formula for the identity of Brahman and Atman. One of the first surprises is that we do not find even a single mention of the word 'Brahman'. What we find in its place is the very generic term *sat*, and we are not sure whether it should be translated as 'Being' or as 'a Being', as in a creator God. My feeling is that it refers to both, and that the Brahman we are presented with here has a very strong personal side. As Sri Ramakrishna says, the 'Nitya and the Lila are the two aspects of the same Reality'.<sup>13</sup> The impersonal Absolute and the personal God belong to one and the same reality; it functions within both the *nitya* and the *lila*, the absolute and the relative. When it is inactive we call it Brahman;

when it is active, projecting the universe and sustaining it, we call it Shakti, *saguna* Brahman.

The second surprise is that rather than finding an analysis of the nature of the individual self, we encounter several examples of how that individual self merges and becomes one with reality, or *sat*. We may not be told what exactly the nature of the individual is, but we know that its individuality disappears either at the time of deep sleep, at the end of a cycle, or in the state of liberation. We are given several illustrations for this: The first ones show how the soul temporarily attains a state of oneness in deep sleep but re-emerges as before after waking because it had not yet attained knowledge.

The latter ones show the full merging and oneness in the state of liberation. And here we have three illustrations: When the bee goes from one flower to another to collect honey and combines them all together, there is no chance of differentiating one portion from the other. Likewise, when the rivers merge into the ocean, they lose all name and form and become indistinguishable from the ocean. And finally, when salt is dissolved in water, it loses its individuality and cannot be removed. Nevertheless, it leaves its salty taste as proof of its presence. So, when the God-realised soul merges one's individuality in pure Being, one will not be able to perceive his own separate existence, but will nevertheless taste the bliss of Brahman, like the salt in the water.

But we also find a new theme. Brahman is not simply the consciousness found in conscious beings. It is also the life force found in living things. The jiva aspect of Brahman must be present for life to exist in beings. And without life, there can be no consciousness in them. So we find that we may cut the surface of a tree and let the sap run out, we may cut off a branch or two, and the tree will live as long as life remains. But once the life force leaves, the tree will


wither and die. And such is the case with human life as well. This causal nature of Brahman with regard to the universe is also seen in the example of the banyan tree. Without the seeds within the fruit, it will not give rise to a new tree. And even though the seeds are too small to be seen, subtle like the nature of *sat*, they give rise to a great tree.

Then we find a beautiful teaching regarding the need for a guru. We are like victims of a kidnapping, who have been blindfolded and taken to an unknown region. We require someone to help remove the blindfold of ignorance and point us in the right direction. Then we ourselves need to start the journey back to our own home, asking at each village for further directions until we have made our way back.

Lastly, we have the illustration of the ordeal by fire, touching a heated axe as a test of truthfulness. Once we are established in truth, that is, have realised our true nature, we transcend the ordinary rules of cause and effect. Just as the hand is not burned by the hot axe, so are we not affected by karma. The seeds of past karma are burnt up so that we will not have to experience their results, and no new karma will be formed for the free soul. The *prarabdha* karma will continue just so the body can continue to live until we reach the state of final liberation.

So, this is the Brahman of the '*tat tvam asi*' of the *Chhandogya Upanishad*. Not a mere lifeless absolute, transcendent, indifferent, inactive consciousness, but a great Being who willingly projects the universe, or at least the elements necessary for the evolution of the universe. It is not unlike the Old Testament God who creates the sun and the moon, the stars, different creatures, one by one, merely by the thought, 'Let there be light', and so on. The *sat* of the *Chhandogya Upanishad* appears to be a great Being, who provides the life force for all living things as well as consciousness. But the main teaching seems to

be that after projecting the universe, Brahman enters into it, sustains it, lives in it, and is present within it. And this also seems to be the key to the great statement, repeated eight times, '*tat tvam asi*'. Shvetaketu is told that he is that subtle essence which dwells within all beings, in the space within the heart, the size of a thumb and yet as vast as the sky. That which we foolishly take to be our self is nothing but that reality, the Atman, the Self, the ultimate reality, and the cause of everything, *sat*. It is the source of all that exists, of all that lives, and of all that is conscious. That is the true being, that is the real self, and we are that.'

And finally, we learn from Uddalaka's teachings to his son, Shvetaketu, that the real nature of Brahman or Reality is far beyond our ability to comprehend. On the one hand, it is too large to get our arms around it, too vast, too all-comprehending. On the other hand, it is too subtle to grasp, too minute, too elusive. And yet, that is our true nature. We are that. It is in essence the same teachings that we find in the Advaitic interpretations of these four *mahavakyas*, and yet, how full of transcendent beauty and majesty, how vast in its conception, how vibrant and living are these teachings as found in the poetry of the Upanishads. 

## References

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4. *Aitareya Upanishad*, 3.1.3.
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6. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 3.14.1.
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8. M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 343.
9. *Aitareya Upanishad*, 3.1.1.
10. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.4.9.
11. *Mandukya Upanishad*, 1.
12. See *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 6.1.3.
13. *Gospel*, 359.