

Fifth Chapter

The interpretation of *Tattvamasi* and its significance in Modern Indian

Thought

Section-I

Is *Tattvamasi* mere a conceptual thought?

According to the *Advaitins*, all *mahāvākyas* proclaim the great metaphysical truth of the identity of the individual self with *Brahman*. Śaṅkara himself and other later preceptors like Sarvajñātmanmuni; Vidyāraṇyamuni etc. interpret *Tattvamasi* as implying the metaphysical identity of the individual self with *Brahman*. Here some questions may be raised:¹

- Can *Tattvamasi* be interpreted also as an ethical concept?
- Can *Tattvamasi* be accepted as a moral maxim?
- Is *Tattvamasi* just a conceptual thought or can we accept this as a guiding principle?

Two contrary views have been found regarding the ethical principle of *Tattvamasi*. Some critics considered *Tattvamasi* antagonistic to religion and ethics. According to them, there cannot be any space for active ethics, because ethics presupposes plurality or ultimate difference of an individual from another. If everything is *Brahman*, why should one take an effort for the advancement of self or for the good of others? Western scholars A.C. Bouquet, Albert Schweitzer etc. seriously attack on the metaphysical interpretation of *Tattvamasi* and such type of thesis. They claimed that of their day-to-day practical life and social service will be meaningless.

On the contrary of the above mentioned view our new- *Vedāntins* interpret *Tattvamasi* as an ethical concept. The focal point of their argument is thus:

If we are identical with other and with *Brahman*, then we cannot hurt others because whom we want to hurt? *Mahāvākya* is therefore the foundation of morality. If we are identical with other and with *Brahman* then we try to good for others. If *jīva* is none other than *Brahman* then we cannot hurt others because whom we are going to hurt. Everything is *Brahman* everyone is *Brahman*. Therefore, *Tattvamasi* as well as other *mahāvākyas* are the foundation of morality. We try to establish this from some occidental and oriental scholars' writings.

Section-II

Vivekānanda's interpretation

Vivekānanda (1863-1902) spoke of the need for a practical way to achieve moral results. Vivekānanda never considered an individual is mere an ordinary human being but potentially as powerful as the divine is. This view he borrowed from the dictum '*jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ*'. To Swāmiji the essence of all ethics is the perception and the feeling of being one with universe. Each being is respectable, powerful and eternal like divine. According to the *Advaita Vedānta*, each object is this universe including the human being is a manifestation of *Brahman*. If one individual able to realize *Brahman*, then he becomes *Brahman*. *Śruti* also confirms that - '*Brahmavid brahmaiva bhavati*' (*Br.up.3.29*) . However, before the realization he troubles under the misconception that he is just a limited being. Pointing out the very truth to the bound soul, the *Upaniṣad* says- 'That thou art'. Swāmi Vivekānanda on his various lectures and letters gave emphasis on this epoch-making *mahāvākya* that identifies individual self with *Brahman* and had

given a broader and deeper ethical interpretation of it. Swami Vivekānanda confirmed us that if someone starts to think that he is potentially identical with Supreme Reality i.e. Supreme *Brahman*, then he must have feel strength and energy in him. Thinking of oneself as powerful, fearless, as being identical with supreme divinity is true religion, not just trembling before God who sits beyond this world for judging our actions. He gave a new interpretation of *mahāvākya* in this way-

“...evan the gate of death, in the greatest danger, in the thick of battle field, at the bottom of the ocean, on the tops of the highst mountain, in the thickest of the forest, tell yourself I am he. Day and night, say I am he. It is the greatest strength, it is religion.”²

If each and everyone in the world are identical with me, therefore, in injuring another, I am injuring myself, and in loving another, I love myself. This knowledge follows from the *mahavakya* ‘*Tat tvam asi*’. Not only that if some one considers all as his own self treats no one else, as a stranger, and then there will total harmony. This *Vedāntic* principle provides us the basic of ethics. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* teaches us that ‘you are that’-that each of us individual is ultimately identical with Supreme Being of the universe. This idea of personal identity with *Brahman* is standard in the *Advaita Vedānta* tradition. Vivekānanda added an innovative idea i.e. an ethics of altruism. If each of us is identical with *Brahman* we are therefore also each identical with everyone else. This expression of oneness is what we call love and sympathy and it is the basis of all our ethics and morality. This expression of oneness is summed up in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* by the celebrated aphorism ‘*Tattvamasi*’.

To everyone this is thought thou art one with the Universal Being, and as such every self that exists, is your self, and everybody that exists, is your body in hurting anyone you hurt yourself,

involving one you love yourself. From this point of view, all are related in the true sense of the term and therefore there does not arise any question of conflict among social beings and it leads to a good moral life. In Vivekānanda's voice-

“Though all religions have taught ethical precepts, such as ‘do not kill, do not injure, love your neighbour as yourself etc. yet now of these has given the reason. Why should I not injure my neighbour? To this question there was no satisfactory or conclusive answer forthcoming until it was evolved by the metaphysical speculations of the *hindus* who could not rest satisfied with mere dogmas. So the *Hindus* say, that this *ātman* is absolutely and all pervading, therefore infinite. In addition, each individual soul is a part and parcel of that Universal Soul, which is infinite. Therefore, in injuring his neighbor the individual actually injures himself. This is the basic metaphysical all ethical codes.”³

The *Vedāntic* principle provides us the basis of ethics. It gives us the message of enjoyment through renunciation. If one feels the existence of self to all social beings then one must not enjoy one's life after confining oneself within rather he will try to share the enjoyment with others. All are related in the true sense of the term and hence there does not arise any question of conflict among social beings. It leads to a moral good life.

Swāmiji's frameworks of social service come to life through *sevā*. However, the concept and practice of *sevā* already existed in Indian religion especially in *Vedāntic* cult. Traditional *sevā* was worship of God. It becomes worship of God in human beings and *sevā* moved as *sādhana* that can lead us to *mokṣa*. Swāmiji says-

“This is gist of all worship to be pure and to good to others. He who sees *Siva* in the poor, in the weak...”⁴

Thus, Swāmiji reinterpreted the metaphysical idea of oneness and stressed upon the practical implication. Swāmiji uttered -‘Arise awake and stop not till the goal reached.’ Here mere arising is not sufficient for the people but awakening is also essential for them. Everyone should awake from the sleep of wrong conception about oneself. One should awake after realizing the divinity existing in one self. One should realize the truth of the mantra ‘*Tattvamasi*’. Swāmi Vivekānanda had tried to harmonize between material and spiritual needs. Always through his lectures and writings, he had given emphasis on both the sides. To him the doctrine of the *Advaita Vedānta* not only quenches one’s spiritual thirst but the need of our day to day mundane life too, which is also essential. Vivekānanda gives a new interpretation of *Tattvamasi* considering its practical aspect. He himself said that he had brought down the doctrine of *Advaita Vedānta* from the forest to serve individuals day-to-day needs.

Section –III

Schopenhauer’s interpretation

“Philosophy and Confrontation” is a collection of essays written by Paul Hacker (1913-1979 C.E.), the famous indologist of twentieth century. The essays of this book are primary concerned with traditional modern *Vedānta*. This book was forwarded and was edited by Wilhelm Halbfass. ‘Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics’, one of the essay of this book, was based on *neo-hinduism*, introduced the problem of interpretation of *Vedānta* in colonial India. He pointed out the Christian and nationalist inspiration of *neo-hinduism* by documenting extensive conceptual

borrowings. In this section, we limit our discussion only on *Tattvamasi* issue related Hacker's view.

In 1962, Hacker wrote an article namely, 'Schopenhauer Und Die Ethic Des Hinduismus'. Now the article is translated as 'Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics' and published in a collection of Hacker's writings by Hacker's student Wilhelm Halbfass. Hacker boldly claimed that the application of use of '*Tattvamasi*' in ethics has been started recent within himself. To him traditional *Hinduism* did not relate '*Tattvamasi*' to ethics. He claimed that infact *neo-hinduism* was influenced by Western interpretations of itself in coming to this viewpoint. Hacker specially indicated to the German Philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860 C.E.) and to the Schopenhauer's student Paul Deussen(1845-1919 C.E.) for this usage. To him this ethics is not even Indian at all, but a hermeneutic invention of German Philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. In his work 1841, "*On the Basis of Morality*" Schopenhauer identified compassion as the fundamental basis for morality. Schopenhauer claimed-

"The readers of my ethics known that with me the ultimate foundation of morality is the truth which in the Vedas and Vedanta receives its expression in the established mystical formula, 'tat tvam asi', which is spoken with reference to every living thing, be it man or beast, and is called the mahavakya, the great word."⁵

Deussen took the principle further and actually advocated it as the basis how we should act. Deussen gave a lecture in Bombay on February 25th 1893 concerning the *Tat tvam asi* theory of the foundation of ethics. The lecture was published in his famous book, "*On the Philosophy of Vedanta*". He said-

“The gospels postulates quite correctly as the highest law of morality: love your neighbour as yourself. But why should I do so, since by the order of nature I feel pain and pleasure only in myself,not in my neighbor? The answer is not in Bible (this venerable book being not yet quite free from semantic realism), but it is in the veda, in the great formula’tat tvam asi’-thou art that’,which gives in three words all of metaphysics and morals.you shall love your neighbor as yourself because you are your neighbor, and mere illusion makes you believe that your neighbor is something different from yourself.”⁶

Vivekānanda sailed from Bombay to America on 31th May 1893 to take part in the Parliament of Religion at the World fair in Chicago in September 1893. He arrived at the end of July and during the next two years, he lectured at different place in the United States including Parliament of Religion. He travelled via Paris to England in August 1895 and stayed there until April 1896. During the next eight month, he stayed in England and in Switzerland. Vivekānanda went to Germany and he was pleased being guest of renounned scholar Paul Deussen. The European tour he was accomplished by his disciple Mr.and Mrs. Sevier. Hacker boldly claimed that it is not until after his meeting that Vivekānanda’s writings included the principle as basis for ethics. Prior to this time, Vivekānanda’s ethics was based on the idea of disinterested action. Even Vivekānanda said that it was foolish talk to speak of doing well to the world. According to Hacker, after the meeting with Paul Deussen, Vivekānanda delivered a lecture on Wimbledon, namely ‘The Philosophy of Vedas’ (Vedānta as factor in civilization), this lecture was quite similar with Deussen’s Bombay lecture. The similar portion of this lecture was-

“While the *Vedānta* philosophers solved that question, they at the same time discovered the basis of ethics. Though all religions have thought ethical percepts, such as, do not kill, do not

injure;love your neighbour as yourself, etc; yet none of these has given the reason. To this question there was no satisfactory or conclusive answer forthcoming until it was evolved by the metaphysical speculations of the *Hindus* who could not rest satisfied with mere dogmas. So the *Hindus* say, that this atman is absolutely and all pervading, therefore infinite. There cannot be two infinities,for they would limit each other and would become finite. In addition, each injuring his neighbor the individual actually injures himself. This is the basic metaphysical all ethical codes.”⁷

Next, Hacker argued that-

The main ideas in his passage come unmistakably from Deussen’s Bombay lecture. From the spring onwards, when he spoke about ethics in India,Europe or America, Vivekānanda habitually presented the Schopenhauer-Deussen pseudo *Vedānta* theory without abandoned his earlier ethical ideas.

Section –IV

The controversy

According to Hacker the ‘Tattvamasi ethics’ did not found in any dated works of Vivekānanda before he met Paul Deussen in 1896. However, we may boldly argue that many of Vivekānanda’s writings and lectures are still undated. Even we find some dated passages where ‘Tattvamasi ethics’ enshrined in his writings. Dermot Killingways in his article ‘Vivekananda’s Western Message’ highlights on this issue. We try to show some instances, which disprove Hacker’s proposal.

Vivekananda wrote a letter on 20th August 1893 to his disciple Alasinga Perumal where he stated about *Tattvamasi* in indirect way. To counter a view that oppression in India is the fault of Hindu religion Vivekananda says- “on the other hand, your religion teaches you that every being is only your self-multiplied.” It is true that he did not expound the point but the implied meaning is that this doctrine teaches that not to oppress others because every being is only our own self.

In his lecture ‘*The Spirit and Influence of Vedanta*’ which was delivered on 28th March 1896 at Twentieth Century Club, Boston he stated-

“This expression of oneness is what we call love and sympathy, and it is the basis of all our ethics and morality. This is summed up in the Vedanta philosophy by the celebrated aphorism, *tat tvam asi*, thou art that. To every man, this is taught: thou art one with this universal being, and, as such, every soul that exists is your body; and in hurting anyone, you hurt yourself, in loving anyone, you love yourself.”⁸

Since it was delivered in Boston, America on March 1896 according to the available biographical information, it would have been given certainly before he left for London in April 1896 where he would meet Paul Deussen.

In his famous lecture, ‘Atman’ after saying that *Advaita Vedanta* gives freedom from fear he stated-

“Yet we know that therein lies the explanation of all ethics, of all morality and all spirituality in the universe. Why is it every one says, ‘do good to others? Where is its explanation? Why is it that all great men have preached that brotherhood of mankind, and greater men the brotherhood of

all lives? Because whether they were conscious of it or not, behind all that, though all their irrational and personal superstitions, was peering forth the eternal light of the self denying all manifoldness, and asserting that the whole universe but one.”⁹

Dermot Killinngley in his article “*Vivekananda’s Westernmessage*” uttered that-

If Hacker’s view that Vivekananda’s ethical use of *Tattvaamasi* was taken from Deussen’s Bombay lecture is to be upheld, we must either date this passage after the meeting with Deussen’s or modify Hacker’s chronology by supposing that the substance of the passage in Deussen’s lecture was known to Vivekananda, either in print or through a third party before the meeting.

When *Tattvamasi* was criticized as armchair philosophy and socially irrelevant, Swāmiji showed that this ancient dictum is consistent with the highest human ethics. However, the message of *Tattvamasi* was basically spiritual and philosophical but had deep practical and social implications. The essence of ethics is the perception and the feeling of being one with the whole universe. Tressing on the *Advaitic* doctrine of the oneness of being Swamiji provided a rational basis for active life and preached a religion of equality and universal goodwill. In this way, he established that the metaphysical import of *Tattvamasi* could be converted into practical religion and ethics. We may conclude that Swāmiji’s concept of *sevā* logically had deducted from the concept of *Tattvamasi*. All selves living on this earth have essential identity and affinity among themselves because each self is the manifestation of the same reality-the absolute *Brahman*. This conviction forms the genesis of Swāmiji’s spiritual humanism. We learn the new *mahavakya* i.e. ‘*sivajnane jivaseva*’. Based on the teaching of the *Advaitic* ideal of oneness of existence he also tried to solve social problems of India. Apparently, *sevā* is helping others with a sense of

difference. However, in essence *sevā* is to service without the sense of any kind of difference or separate identity. That is possible only when one realizes consciousness everywhere. Thus, our modern *Vedāntins* have given wonderful philosophical explanation and noble practical orientation of *Tattvamasi*.

Our observation

Tattvamasi is an *Upaniṣadic* statement. Classical commentators or interpreters always emphasized its metaphysical significance. The extreme monists emphasize the identity of individual self and Universal Self. The dualists interpret it in a different manner. However, all of them enhanced its metaphysical approach only. In nineteenth century, the dimension of interpretation has to be going to change. Thinkers start to explain its moral values. Therefore, its greatness has acquired a new dimension in this century. Then our modern Cārvāka Dayananda (1924-2007 C.E.) has raised a different issue. He and other thinkers try to mould its interpretation. Thus, the advice of Uddālaka is very much contemporary and its greatness has acquired new life in different ages. Now a days thinkers busy with the question that whether the identity statements like '*Tattvamasi*' is just like 'the morning star is the evening star' or not? As far as Fregean view is concerned the referents of 'morning star' and 'evening star' are the one and the same object though the senses are difference in character. The senses of 'the morning star is evening star' are 'star seeing in the morning' and the 'star seeing in the evening'. Though the senses of the two terms are different from each other, yet the referent objects are one and the same. In case of '*Tattvamasi*' the sense are different no doubt, because '*Tat*', which is a pronoun, represents some entity and '*tvam*' also represents some entity different from '*Tat*', which is evidenced from the very construction of the term. '*Tat*' represents something having neutergender

(better to say beyond gender) why ‘*tvam*’ may represent someone having non-nutergender (that is either masculine or feminine). However, so far referent is concerned both the terms have two referents having identity in difference that is between two referred objects. ‘*Tat*’ stands for omniscient and all-pervasivity but ‘*tvam*’ stands for less knower and having atomic magnitude. If we see the reference only then it is obvious that there is a lot of difference or non-identity between the two. However, this is one side of the story. As far as consciousness is concerned then both the terms have referred to two conscious entities. In this part, there lies an utter identity. This type of identity is quite identity in difference unlike the morning star and evening star. For this reason by uttering ‘*Tattvamasi*’, one should understand that he is identified with *Brahman* but in mundane world, he never realizes the truth. A human being standing ‘*tvam*’ is always identical with the primordial consciousness because he is also a conscious being. However, at this stage his having nescience he is not feeling that he is omniscient and pervading being. That is why it is general tendency of human being to achieve the absolute identity with *Brahman*. One of the means of achieving this goal is to ‘hearing’ the *mahāvākya* like ‘*Tattvamasi*’. Through ‘hearing this *mahāvākya* an individual’s nescience may be removed and achieve identity with the absolute *Brahman* which is the stage of *Pāramārthikasattā*. When the *Advaitin* argues that ‘*Tattvamasi*’ asserts the identity between individual self and *Brahman*, they are not talking of identity in the sense of tautology either in the sense of mere repetition of the sentence or in virtue of its formal structure because what is asserted is that the underlying self of the individual is *Brahman*. ‘*Tat tvamasi*’ must not be expressed just like ‘*a=a*’ because what is meant by *ātman* for the individual is different from what is meant by *Brahman* for the individual. When the *Advaitins* argued that ‘*jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ*’, they are not establishing that individual self related with ego and therefore, is identical with *Brahman*. We may quote from

Eliot Deutsch's writings- "Identity judgements such as... 'Thou art that' -are not for the Advaitin, mere tautologies...". He tried to argue that not all identity propositions are tautologies, nor are they superfluous. He further said "...the concrete representation of a movement of thought from one ontological level (of particularity) through another (of universality) to yet another (of unity), wherein the attainment of the latter negates the distinctions between the former."¹⁰

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