



Aham Brahmasmi : I am Brahman - I am Spirit Soul.

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ABSTRACT

Literally, Aham (अहं) means "I"--that which cannot be deserted or abandoned on account of being constant, unavoidable, ever present; Brahman (ब्रह्म) means ever-full or whole (ब्रह्म is the first case ending singular of Brahman); and Asmi (अस्मि) means "am," the first-person singular present tense of the verb "अस्," "to be." This mahāvākya belongs to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad of the Shukla Yajurveda. Brahman is the Infinite Reality, the all-encompassing existence in itself; only when the ego dies can this be realized. In this sentence the "I" is not the limited transmigrating ego, the doer and the enjoyer within, and also not the body and the mind. Man (who is a conscious entity) alone has the capacity to improve his present state, to guide his future, to enquire and know the truth, and to free himself from the cycle of birth and death (*vidyā adhikāra*) through thoughtful actions (*karma adhikāra*).

1. Introduction

Vidyāranya in his Panchadasi (V.4) explains:

स्वतः पूर्णः परात्माऽत्र ब्रह्मशब्देन वर्णितः ।

अस्मीत्यैक्य-परामर्शः तेन ब्रह्म भवाम्यहम् ॥

"Infinite by nature, the Supreme Self is described here by the word *Brahman* (lit. ever expanding; the ultimate reality); the word *asmi* denotes the identity of *aham* and *Brahman*. Therefore, (the meaning of the sentence is) "I am Brahman."

This realization is gained through true enquiry.

2. In Vaishnavism

Vaishnavas, when they talk about Brahman, usually refer to impersonal Brahman, brahmajyoti (rays of Brahman). Brahman here means God - Narayana, Rama or Krishna. Thus, the real meaning of "aham brahma asmi" is that "I am a drop of Ocean of Consciousness", or "I am soul, part of cosmic spirit, Parabrahman". Here, term Parabrahman is introduced to avoid confusion. If Brahman can mean soul (though, Parabrahman is also the soul, but Supreme one - Paramatma), then Parabrahman should refer to God, Lord Vishnu. Real problem with "aham brahma asmi" is that Brahman also means mahat-tattva - material substance. Lord Krishna says in Bhagavad-Gita: "The total material substance, called Brahman, is the source of birth, and it is that Brahman that I impregnate, making possible the births of all living beings, O son of Bharata." So, Parabrahman, Ishvara, is the source of Brahman - two energies: conscious Brahman (souls, jiva-atamas or tatastha-shakti) and unconscious Brahman (matter).

3. Significance

This sentence appears in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad when the sage, in the context of meditation on the Self, in reply to the query – What did that Brahman know by which It became all? - states:-

"ब्रह्म वा इदमग्र आसीत्, तदात्मनामेवावेत्, अहं ब्रह्मास्मीति । तस्मात्तत्सर्वमभवत्; तद्यो यो देवानां प्रत्यबुध्यत स एव तदभवत्, तदधीर्णाम् तथा मनुष्याणाम्..."

"This (self) was indeed Brahman in the beginning; It knew only Itself as, "I am Brahman". Therefore, It became all; and whoever among the gods knew It also became That; and the same with sages and men..." - (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad I.iv.10)

In his comment on this passage Sankara explains that here Brahm is not the conditioned Brahm, that a transitory entity cannot be eternal, that knowledge about Brahm, the infinite all-pervading entity, has been enjoined, that knowledge of unity alone dispels ignorance and that the meditation based on resemblance is only an idea. He tells us the sentence *Aham Brahm asmi* is the explanation of the mantra –

पूर्णमदः पूर्णमिदं पूर्णात्पूर्णमुदच्यते |

पूर्णस्य पूर्णमादाय पूर्णमेवावशिष्यते ||

"That ('Brahm') is infinite, and this ('universe') is infinite; the infinite proceeds from the infinite. (Then) taking the infinitude of the infinite ('universe'), it remains as the infinite ('Brahm') alone." - (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad V.i.1)

He explains that unity and plurality are contradictory only when applied to the Self, which is eternal and without parts, but not to the effects, which have parts.^[3] The *aham* in this sentence is not closed in itself as a pure mental abstraction but it is radical openness. Between Brahman and *aham-brahman* lies the entire temporal universe experienced by the ignorant as a separate entity (duality).^[4]

There are various kinds of Dharmas in the world. Brahmacharya, Grihasta Dharma, Vaana Prastha Dharma and Sanyasa are known as the Asrama Dharmas. In India, the Varna or Caste Dharma relate to Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaisyas and Sudras. Man's life is thus regulated by dharmas. But these above mentioned dharmas are related to the mind only. Enquiry will show that these Dharmas are of minor importance, since they are related to the mind alone.

There is one Dharma which is related to the Atma. It is universal, eternal and thus greater than the Asrama Dharmas. That is the Dharma concerning the consciousness of the "I". "I" here means Aham. Aham means the Atman which is equal to Brahman. Thus, "Aham Brahmaasmi" means I am the embodiment of divine consciousness.

This Dharma is the inner motivator. It expresses itself as "I" and shines forth in its fullness. It manifests itself in all beings, especially in all human beings. But man does not recognize its effulgence in spite of its presence within him. What is the reason?

Man, today has totally identified himself with the body and the world. He has filled with all kinds of worldly attachments and possessions and has forgotten the true nature of his own self as divine. That's why Jesus says, "Will a person gain anything if he wins the whole world but losses his soul, (Mt 16:26)". It is only which men gives up the ego sense relating to the body and realizes the role of the Atmic power of the "I" that he would be able to comprehend the principle of divinity within him. Then, how to realize the role of the Atmic power of the "I"?

Clouds which have been caused by the sun hide the sun from view. How then are we to see the sun? We know that sun is there, but is not visible because it is covered by clouds. When the wind blows, the clouds are scattered and the sun is visible again. The fire in a burning piece of charcoal is not visible when it is covered by ashes. The reason is that the ashes, which came out of the fire, have covered the fire. To see the fire we have to remove the ashes. Similarly, we have to remove all that is Angatma. When the Anaatma is cast off, the Atma shines of its own accord, just as the burning charcoal is perceived when the ashes are removed and the sun is perceived when the clouds move away. The Atma is omnipresent. When we want to realize it, we have to get rid of the Anaatma that develops it. As long as one does not experience the atma bhava, then he will be immersed in the anaatma. When the Atma is experienced there is peace. Hence, what man has to seek and acquire is the bliss of the Atma. This Ananda can be experienced through Yoga which means union. Yoga is the unity of the individual with the divine. Yoga means an end to dualism.

Then on understands the true nature of "I" as an omnipresent entity present in every living being. This is the truth of the Vedic declaration, "Aham Brahmaasmi". To understand what Bahman is one has to understand what "I" is! I am Brahma and Brahman is me. We have to reach this realization. Jesus Christ has reached this realization and identified himself totally with his Father, "My father and I are one", (Jn 10:30).

However, this kind of identification should not be an artificial exercise. It should come from the heart, deep within. In declaring I am the Divine one should express a genuine and deep experience. One should feel that divine is not separate from him. Instead of that if one merely repeats, I am Divine, I am Brahman, it does not bring any realization, even a tape recorder can repeat so. It must come from the heart. Antaryamin must be realized deep within the Antah Karana.

Therefore, the Divine should be comprehended by earnest enquiry and a profound inner experience. It should, however, be realized that as long as we live in this phenomenal world and have to perform worldly duties it is not easy to express this total oneness in the Divine. It has to be a gradual process by which the divinization of life is achieved. That is why Jesus, said, "the kingdom of heaven is within you, (Lk 17:21)". All that we have to do is to realize the

divinity within us and others and within every living being. Thus, together with Sri Sankaracharya, we too may comprehend the truth of this greater Dharma, "Aham Brahmaasmi", because this Dharma protects it and its implications (Dharma Rakshati Rakshithaha).

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