

[Who Do You Think You Are?](#)

Category : [July/August 2000](#)

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FROM THE THE VEDAS

Who Do You Think You Are?

Swami Nikhilananda's puzzles over a Vedic enigma

In the great Vedic statement, "That thou art." The words "That" and "thou" have two meanings, one direct and one implied. For instance, when it is said that a red-hot iron ball burns an object, the direct meaning is that the ball itself, permeated by fire, does the burning. But, in reality, it is the fire that burns, and this is the implied meaning of the statement. Comparably, when the collective ignorance (which includes both the gross and the subtle bodies) and the Consciousness associated with it (known as Isvara) are taken together with Pure Consciousness (which properly is unassociated with any limiting adjunct), and are regarded as one with it and inseparable, this unit, like the red-hot iron ball, is the direct meaning of the word "That." That is to say, the direct meaning of "That" is Saguna Brahman or Brahman with attributes. But Pure Consciousness without any attributes (which are created by maya) is, like the fire as opposed to the red-hot iron ball, the implied meaning of "That."

Likewise the word "thou" has two meanings, one direct, the other implied. "Thou" directly conveys the idea of a jiva, or individualized soul, associated with an individual body and endowed with such attributes as limited power, limited

knowledge, and dependence, together with the Pure Consciousness which underlies all this. That is to say, the word signifies a living soul, characterized by such limitations as birth and death, hunger and thirst, and pain and pleasure. But Pure Consciousness itself, which is unassociated with any limitation created by maya, though remaining the substratum of the jiva, is the implied meaning of "thou."

The meaning conveyed by the word "art" in "That thou art" is the identity of "That" and "thou." But obviously, "That" and "thou," endowed with contrary attributes, cannot be identical from the standpoint of the direct meanings of the words, that is to say, in a literal sense. The one, the Personal God, differs from the other, the individual soul, as the sun from a glow-worm, the ocean from a well, or Mt. Everest from a mustard-seed. Their underlying identity is a fact established by the direct and immediate experience of Vedantic seers. This identity is therefore explained from the standpoint of implied meaning. Vedantic philosophers reasoned, as stated before, that the contrasting attributes which distinguish Isvara and jiva are not ultimately real but the result of superimposition [according to Sankara's Mayavadin philosophy]. It is through maya that Brahman, or Pure Consciousness, appears to have become the universe and its Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer. When through the Vedantic reasoning of negation one eliminates the false superimpositions, one realizes by direct experience that the ultimate Reality is Brahman, Pure Consciousness, rather than Isvara or jiva.

Vedanta discards the direct meaning and explains the statement, "That thou art," by its implied meaning. To give an illustration: Upon seeing a man named Thomas after a long

time, one might exclaim, "This is that Thomas!" One might have seen Thomas in New York in 1940; now one sees him in London in 1966. The Thomas associated with New York and 1940 is not obviously the same Thomas associated with London and 1966. There is a conflict regarding time and place. But still there is the fact of recognition, and this recognition is possible because the conflicting elements, namely, the time and place, are disregarded, and attention is fixed on the man himself. Likewise, in interpreting the sentence, "That thou art" the Vedantist eliminates the contradictory elements associated with "That" and "thou," namely the notions of Creator and creature, and recognizes from the standpoint of Brahman, or Absolute Consciousness, the oneness which is the essence of both.

The realization of the precise meaning of "That thou art" is a transcendental experience. The meaning is lost if the aspirant has the slightest attachment to body, sense-organs, mind or the pleasures associated with them. The Freedom, Peace, Blessedness, Knowledge and Immortality which result from such an experience are totally different from their counterparts on the physical plane of time, space and causality. Through the realization of the identity of "thou" and "That," one comes to understand the true meaning of religion, which is the realization of the eternal oneness of the eternal God and the eternal soul.

The Vedas are the divinely revealed and most revered scriptures, sruti, of Hinduism, likened to the Torah (1,200 bce), Bible New Testament (100 ce), Koran (630 ce) or Zend Avesta (600 bce). Four in number, Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva, the Vedas include over 100,000 verses. Oldest portions may date

back as far as 6,000 bce.

Who Is a Hindu?

"Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence; recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are diverse; and the realization of the truth that the number of gods to be worshiped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of the Hindu religion." B.G. Tilak's definition of what makes one a basic Hindu, as quoted by India's Supreme Court. On July 2, 1995 the Court referred to it as an "adequate and satisfactory formula."