

तत् त्वम ऽसि

Tat Tvam Asi: Asceticism in the Ramayana and Purgatorio

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Tat Tvam Asi - Thou Art That. Its meaning? Simply this: the Self in its original, pure, primordial state is identifiable with *Ultimate Reality* - the ground of all phenomena. The knowledge that this is so characterizes the experience of liberation and salvation. Dante refers to this primordial state as *Primal Love* in each canticle of The Divine Comedy. Moreover, it is the state that Rama & Sita encounter at the conclusion of their fourteen year ascetic exiles and their victory over the evil Ravana in the Ramayana. Where does this notion originate? It is first voiced in the Chandogya Upanishad - as a conversation between Svetaketu and his son.

In the beginning was only Being,

One without a second.

Out of himself he brought forth the cosmos

And entered into everything in it.

There is nothing that does not come from him.

Of everything he is the inmost Self.

He is the truth; he is the Self supreme.

You are that, dear one; you are that.

When a person is absorbed in dreamless sleep

He is one with the Self, though he knows it not.

We say he sleeps, but he sleeps in the Self.

As a tethered bird grows tired of flying

About in vain to find a place of rest

And settles down at last on its own perch,

So the mind, tired of wandering about

Hither and thither, settles down at last

In the Self, dear one, to whom it is bound.

All creatures, dear one, have their source in him.

He is their home; he is their strength.

There is nothing that does not come from him.

Of everything he is the inmost Self.

He is the truth; he is the Self supreme.

You are that, dear one; you are that.

(Upanishads, 117-118)

Asceticism is the preamble to this divinity. It is the path, the way, the Tao, the one and only means. It is my path, your path, THE path to God. True asceticism, in the language of Thomas Keating (47-8), is “not rejection of the world, but the acceptance of everything that is good, beautiful, and true. It is learning how to use our faculties and the good things of this world as God’s gifts rather than expressions of selfishness. The basic ascesis is the appreciation of all that is good on each level of our developing humanity and the integration of the genuine values of each level into the next one. Integration is the unification of experience.” This allows the false self to die, and the true self to emerge as we finally surrender to our participation in the divine life manifesting in our uniqueness.

When we arrive, we understand, again, that we have become divine because of God’s divinity and accordingly we comprehend the reality that God IS in us. That the essence of God is within. We experience the *ouroboros* moment as we see that we have encountered our own selves in and through God. We have eaten our own tail. We are not God, of course, but we find that God is in us and has been all along. Our true self, our reality within the ultimate reality has been revealed. We are the *that* inside of God. Tat Tvam Asi.

Easy? Apparently not. Why is it so hard to understand or believe that we are *that*? Why do many of us never get it or simply take such a long time to awaken to this transcendent truth? Even as you read or hear these words, there is probably some critical thinking ‘bot inside of you that says “crazy. Not true. Can’t be. What’s he talking about?” We spend much of our lives NOT believing this or at least not understanding it, which is essentially the same issue. We believe other realities, other ways. We believe the ways of the body and the mind. We believe in

dualism. We believe in our other self, our false *imago*. To answer this question, we examine two stories: The Divine Comedy and The Ramayana.

Dante, the poet, explores the mind as its own kind of hell (shades of Milton!) in the Inferno - showing us what our own self-possession creates - no hope. Only despair and endless contrapasso. The *divine* of our own making has turned into sin so that the sinner wants nothing else but their very sin and they GET JUST THAT. No sacred Tat Tvam Asi here. Quite the opposite.

Once he has seen how badly things can turn out, in life and in endless death, he then leaves a trail of breadcrumbs for us to follow. These crumbs form purgatory mountain. Dante shows us that it is simply critical, essential, and mandatory to climb that mountain in order to see heaven. In order to participate in the heaven within us, we must first learn to reshape our desire through the ascetic exercise of learning to unhook sin in our minds and bodies. We must first tame our body, ascetically, for in so doing we calm and discipline the mind - aha! - This is the key. This is the root of asceticism, the kernel: unless we tame the body we CANNOT tame the mind. Body, disciplined by renouncing itself, then mind, ready for Tat Tvam Asi. Unless we redirect desire, we cannot let go of self. We cannot release it and forget it. By reining in our bodies, we replace desire for sin with desire for God. Dante demonstrates this by doing the climb himself - showing us that there is no other way than to ascend, allow the angels to remove our the peccatas from our forehead, and then pass through Lethe & Eunoe, arriving at the Garden of Eden (we are back!) on our way to the entrance to the Gateless paradise. Thus, the fascinating ascetic bridle/whip journey up the mount brings about the ultimate preparation for heaven.

Once Dante passes through the Garden of Eden, guided by Beatrice's blinding beauty and unbearable lightness, he is surely ready, finally, for *Tat Tvam Asi*, albeit after he ascends through to the *primum mobile* and says, at last, in Canto XXXIII:

But my own wings could not take me so high
Then a great flash of understanding struck
My mind, and suddenly its wish was granted.

At this point power failed high fantasy
But, like a wheel in perfect balance turning,
I felt my will and my desire impelled

By the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

(Paradiso, XXXIII.139-145)

In paradise, he understands by experience that *Tat Tvam Asi* because he is back in the heavenly garden, standing under the Tree of Life - perhaps represented by the Celestial Rose.

Until that purgatorial ascent, and asceticism is a kind of ascent, we are simply blind, asleep, and, let's face it - dead. This is what Dante is telling us through his Comedy. This is what took him 13000 lines of poetry, as he walked up a small hill, down seemingly endless spiraling caverns and then up an even larger mountain, crossing through two rivers and beyond before he finally

literally saw the lights of paradise, lights shining, at last, inside his own soul. Ironically, this light, this divinity was there, inside of him at the beginning, the Tat Tvam Asi - Thou Art That, was lying dormant as a kind of seedling in his soul from the beginning. He just didn't know.

What about the Hindu side of this paper? We turn to Rama and his journey to divinity as a means of our understanding his affirmation of the incantation of the Upanishads. The story of Rama is a popular one in India. The Ramayana - Romance of Rama has been made into a TV series and is so popular that the cancellation of the show in the 80's resulted in a strike by sanitation workers in North India in order to demand that the government fund more episodes, since it had been, and has re-emerged as the extraordinarily popular - having some 120 million viewers tuning into every weekly episode. The *Ramayana* narrates the tale of Rama who was the eldest of the four sons of Dasharath, the King of Ayodhya. Rama was to become the Ruler of Ayodhya after his father's retirement. But his stepmother, Kaikeyi, wanted her son Bharata to become the king. Rama concedes and accepts his stepmother's 14 year exile in order to allow his brother free reign and to learn a life of asceticism, wisdom, and the ways of spiritual and physical strength.

Rama had to endure his own kind of purgatorial mountain - extending over 14 years of exile - a kind of exile that Dante, too, experienced. He voluntarily moved into a deep forest, far away from people, thus experiencing an ascetic kind of solitude. He needed separation in order to learn how to control his mind through meditation, a process that would not have been possible if he had been exiled in an urban setting. Because of his self-discipline, he never lost sight of his ultimate purpose - to destroy the asuras, the fiends who caused suffering and hardship for all good souls. In a sense, he was called to expunge evil and to destroy Ravana, the leader of the

asuras. This meant that he had to overcome temptations of the flesh, including Ravana's evil sister, who encountered him in order to seduce and destroy him. Rama had acquired enough wisdom to see through her trickery and avoid wasting himself on her vain beauty. Thus, he was able to overcome this "wilderness" temptation and rise above the appeals of power and flesh. His ascetic training served him well.

Ultimately, Rama, Sita and Lakshman wander the forests, combating evil wherever they find it and gaining the blessings of wise men and sages along the way. Many years later, [Ravana](#), the evil King of [Lanka](#), abducted Sita. Ram and Lakshman engage Ravana in battle and rescue Sita and return home to be crowned king and queen. Brahma, comes forward to address Rama, saying: "Of the trinity, I am the Creator, Shiva the Destroyer, and Vishnu the Protector. All three of us derive our existence from the Supreme God and we are subject to dissolution and rebirth. But, the Supreme God who creates us is without beginning or an end. There is neither birth nor growth nor death for the Supreme God. He is the origin of everything and in him everything is assimilated at the end. That God is yourself, and Sita at your side now is a part of that Divinity. This is your real identity." (Ramayana, 150-151)

Dante would say - this is your *imago dei*. This is *Tat Tvam Asi*. East meets west in the spirit inside each one of us. So, what is the payoff of all of this? What do we gain when we reach this realization? Only God. Only divinity. Only having all that we wish for about God inside of us, especially LOVE! God's love is inside of us. It is simply a matter of becoming aware, getting in touch with this internal seed. What more would we want? Is this important? Nothing else really is!

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