

Understanding Īśvara

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Invocatory Prayer

शारदा शारदाम्भोजवदना वदनाम्बुजे ।

सर्वदा सर्वदाऽस्माकं सन्निधिस्सन्निधिं क्रियात् ॥

*Śāradā śāradāmbhojavadanā vadanāmbuje,
sarvadā sarvadā'smākaṁ sannidhissannidhiṁ
kriyāt.*

May the Goddess *Sarasvatī*, with face resembling the autumnal lotus, abide at all times in our lotus-like faces (speech). She, the abode of truth, bestows all (upon Her devotees).

This is a beautiful prayer to Goddess *Sarasvatī*, the mother of all knowledge. The beauty of this verse lies in the rhythmic arrangement of its words called *yamaka* or alliteration. In this, a word or part thereof that occurs earlier is taken up again in the next part of the verses. The repetition of the sound adds to the beauty of the meaning.

Śāradā, śāraṁ ajñānaṁ dyati khaṇḍayati iti, is the one who destroys ignorance. The tense of the verb *kriyāt* in the verse is unique to the Sanskrit language. It means *āsiḥ*, blessing. The teacher blesses the students by saying, 'May *Śāradā devī* manifest in you as well in me.' Without the blessings of the Goddess *Śāradā*, one cannot hope to gain the profound knowledge of *Vedānta*.

The countenance of *Śāradā devī* resembling the autumnal lotus, radiates love and affection towards her progeny. 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever', said the poet Keats. The *devī's* form is a beautiful sight to behold and fills the heart of devotee with joy. 'May she be with us when we speak and when we study'. She is *sarvadā*, bestowing everything in bestowing knowledge upon us, for, knowledge is power and knowledge is wealth; also, the knowledge of the Self redeems

the individual from the bondage of ignorance. Interestingly, *sarvadā* also means 'always'. She is also the *sannidhi* or repository of Truth, the source of all existence. We pray that the Goddess may abide in our hearts.

The human being is fundamentally a *pramātā*, a knower. To know, or understand anything, one needs a means of knowledge. Such a means is called *pramāṇa*, *pramāyaḥ karaṇam*. *Pramā* means precise knowledge and *karaṇam* is the means thereof. We are intrinsically endowed with two means of knowledge. The first is called *pratyakṣa* or perception. We have five sense organs: The eyes to know form and color; the nose to identify smells; the ears to hear sounds; the tongue to discern taste, and the skin to sense heat, cold and texture. These five sense organs constitute the means of cognition called *pratyakṣa*. Perception and observation lead to understanding. It is through observation right from childhood that every human gains the knowledge of things one after another and sheds his or her ignorance gradually.

There is another *pramāṇa* or means of cognition, called *anumāna*, inference. This is the function of the intellect. For instance, wherever we see smoke we conclude the presence of fire as well, even though we do not directly see the fire because it is our common experience that there is no smoke without fire. Such a means of knowledge is called inference. We constantly observe this kind of invariable concomitance or constant association of one thing with another. Thus, we all have the ability to know things not only through our sense organs, but also our intellect, through inference or association.

Perception and inference are the two basic *pramāṇas* that we all endowed with from birth.

These two *pramāṇas* are fundamentally related because inferential knowledge depends on observation through the sense organs. For instance, to conclude that there is a fire, one would first have to see or smell the presence of smoke. Thus, perception and inference are the basic means by which we gain knowledge. However, both *pramāṇas* are subject to various limitations because the mind and sense organs are not infallible in their functioning. Also, there are times when the mind superimposes something else on what the senses perceive. For example, if the eyes cannot recognize a rope in poor light, we might see a snake instead. Therefore, quite often, the *pramātā* or knower is misled and may continue to make mistakes with regard to perception and inference.

There exists a body of knowledge that is not available to us through either of the two *pramāṇas*. We call it the external *pramāṇa*. This helps us where perception and inference fail. As a simple example, take the human eye, which can probe microbes and other minutiae through a microscope as well as peer through space and examine stars and entire galaxies through a telescope. This eye, however, has to depend upon external scrutiny to detect a mere speck of dust that falls upon its own surface. Thus, there are times when you come to know only when another person tells you of something. Often, you can never gain such knowledge through your own senses or intellect. This shows that not all knowledge is acquired through perception and inference alone. That body of knowledge, which is beyond the pale of both perception and inference, is called *śabda*. The *Vedas* are a body of knowledge in the form of *śabda*.

The word *Veda* come from the verbal root *vida*, which stands for knowledge. The etymology of the word is *vedayati iti vedaḥ*, meaning ‘that which helps to know is the *Veda*’. The *Veda*, therefore, is a body of knowledge. The *Veda* is defined thus:

प्रत्यक्षेणानुमित्या वा यस्तूपायो न बुध्यते ।

एनं विदन्ति वेदेन तस्माद्धेदस्य वेदता ॥

pratyakṣeṇānumityā vā yastūpāyo na budhyate, enaṁ vidanti vedena tasmādhedasya vedatā

The means (to the ultimate good) that cannot be ascertained through perception and inference and inference can be readily understood through a study of the *Veda*. Thus, the word *Veda* (a body of knowledge) is indeed significant.

Therefore, the *Veda* is an independent *pramāṇa*. It is called *śabda-pramāṇa*, trustworthy verbal testimony. *Āpta vākyam śabdaḥ*; *śabda* means a statement or teaching of the benefactor. Thus, the *Veda*, or, in particular, the concluding portion of *Veda* called *Vedānta* or *Upaniṣad*, gives us the knowledge of *Īśvara*.

Vision of *Īśvara*

The *vedic* vision of *jaḡat*, the universe, and of *Brahman*, the Godhead, has no parallel in the history of mankind. In this vision, *Brahman* is the spaceless and timeless Reality that manifests as the universe. Thus, *Brahman* the attributeless Being (*nirguṇa*) apparently becomes *Īśvara* with the universe as an attribute (*saguṇa*). However, the universe is not an intrinsic attribute of *Brahman*.

The *śruti* presents *Brahman* as *satyam jñānāmanantam brahma* (*Brahman* is Existence, Awareness Infinite). We are only aware of a limited existence in terms of space, time, and form, the *deśa-kāla-paricchina*. For example, when we say that there ‘is’ some object, we mean a particular type of existence, which is bound by being ‘here’ and not obtaining elsewhere (*deśa-paricchinna*), bound by ‘now’ and not obtaining at

some other time (*kāla-paricchina*), and bound by a specific form and no other form (*vastu-paricchina*). It does not occur to us that there could be Existence (*sat*) that transcends these three limitations. The space, time, and name and form rise together and set together. They resolve into us when we fall asleep and re-surface when we emerge from sleep. Even theologians take these limitations for granted. According to Albert Einstein, the entire universe is seen against the fabric of space-time. There can be no universe or world of objects except against the background of space-time. It is a package deal in which one exists because of the other.

The world, as we know it, is nothing but Existence, taken to be some object or the other. To understand this better, let us take the example of a golden necklace or golden bangle. Is the necklace or bangle an attribute of gold, or gold the attribute of the ornament? The suffix –en in ‘golden’ seems to indicate that gold is an attribute of the necklace and the bangle. This is a wrong understanding. In reality, the ornaments are the attributes of the gold; it is essentially gold that obtains in the form of the necklace, and it is gold we are looking at in the form of the necklace, and it is gold we are looking at it in the form of bangle. An ornament is none other than gold in form or another. Similarly, when we say that there ‘is’ a pot, (*ghaṭa asti*), we have understood existence in terms of an attribute called pot. As in the case of gold and ornaments, we imagine that existence is an attribute of the pot (*san ghaṭah*), while, in truth, it is the pot that is an attribute of existence.

We are unable to visualize pure Existence. The mind always relates to things in terms of their *nāma-rūpa* or form a given name alone. Our minds build a ‘prison cell’ in which we all live. It is a cell within three walls: space, time, and causation. That is the reason why we can only look at existence in terms of space and time. That is how the mind understands existence; it cannot conceive of it any other way.

The mind also has the tendency to impute the attributes of one thing to another. We have seen how we can appreciate existence only in terms of the name and form of a perceived object, which, by nature, is limited in space-time. Thus, the name and form become an *upādhi* or limiting adjunct to the Supreme Reality. The pot, which is but a shape that exists in the here and now, has not always been there. It did not exist before it was made and, at some point of time, will also cease to exist. We should understand that all the limitations of space-time are incidental (*aupādhika*) and belong to the *upādhi* or limiting adjunct alone. The existence that is known, experienced, and called the *jagat* is the *saguṇa sat*. *Saguṇa* implies that the *guṇas* or attributes of the *upādhi* seem to limit the reality. In other words, they are superimpositions alone.

When properly understood this existence that we appreciate in terms of *upādhis* is but *Brahman* or Existence-Absolute alone. This is the most fundamental way of looking at *Brahman*. This existence, which we perceive as the world, the world of names and forms, is in reality the Existence-Absolute, *Brahman*. When all the attributes of names and forms with which we identify Existence as in ‘pot-existence’ or ‘cloth-existence’ are totally negated, what remains is the Existence-Absolute that is *Īśvara*, above and beyond every manner of existence and its counterpart, non-existence.

The world and ‘me’ are not two separate or independent entities. The limited existence that we perceive implies a separation from the whole. In perceiving the ‘Being’ in terms of names and forms, we disconnect the person, the individual, from the whole. This apparent separation of ‘me’, the *draṣṭā* or subject, from the whole, the *dṛśya* or object is an error in our understanding. We cannot have an object without a subject; neither can we have a subject without a object. Therefore, the moment we have the *dṛśya-jagat*, we also have the

limited being, the *draṣṭā*. Thus both the seer and the seen are superimpositions on the one non-dual Existence-Awareness absolute that is *Īśvara*, and the separation is unreal.

Do you want proof of *Īśvara's* existence? When you say that there 'is' a pot, it is proof enough of *Īśvara's* existence. The idea is that whenever and wherever we recognize something as 'is' or existent, the 'is-ness' or existence is indeed *Brahman*. That 'something', however, is a name and form, and is hence unreal. A discriminating devotee sees the clouds and rains, and therefrom understands that *Īśvara* exists. He sees a peacock dancing and understands that *Īśvara* exists. What an artist *Īśvara* must be! There are infinite aspects of the glory of *Īśvara* present before us that can readily signify *Īśvara* to an observant mind. However, to a saint all existence is *Īśvara*; he recognises *Īśvara* in all that exists. A verse from the *Kaṭhōpaniṣat* (2-3-13) reflects the vision of *Īśvara*:

अस्तीत्येवोपलब्धव्यस्तत्त्वभावेन चोभयोः ।

अस्तीत्येवोपलब्धस्य तत्त्वभावः प्रसीदति ॥

*astītyevopalabdhaṅvystattvabhāvena cobhayoḥ
astītyevopalabdhasya tattvabhāvaḥ prasīdati*

One has to recognize the *ātma*, which is *Brahman*, alone manifests as the 'being' (of the objects of the world). *Brahman* is the 'is-ness' from the point of view of a given name and form while, in itself, it is the Being-Absolute. To the one who focuses his attention on the 'is-ness' of the world-objects, the being reveals itself.

Īśvara is the efficient-and-material cause of the universe

The vision of *Īśvara* as the *abhinna-nimitta-upādāna-kāraṇa*, the efficient-and-material cause of the this universe, is unique and marvellous. Understanding *Īśvara* as the *nimitta-kāraṇa*, the

efficient cause, the One who has created this universe, does not require much insight. All other presupposes a sentient maker; even a child can infer with its limited knowledge that there must be a maker of the toy with which it plays. We look at the universe to infer that *Īśvara* must have created it. There is such symmetry and order everywhere that one can only conclude it to be the handiwork of a sentient maker. Science and technology do not create anything new. Science is a study of the order and the symmetry of this universe, while technology is reorganisation of the things of the world to suit our need and comforts. If there were no order, there would be no science. Thus, science is itself a proof of *Īśvara's* glory.

Much insight, however, is required to know that *Īśvara* is the material cause of the universe. We can look at any aspect of the universe and say, "This is *Īśvara's* glory". When it rains we could say, "Oh! *Īśvara* sent these clouds". We could then imagine *Īśvara* as sitting somewhere and issuing an order to the clouds to go ahead and rain. Another way of looking at this is to say that *Īśvara* did not order the clouds to rain, but came in the form of clouds and rained. An even better view of understanding that *Īśvara* first came in the form of clouds and then came successively in the form of rains, crops, food, hunger and enjoyment. Every aspect and every facet of this universe is the manifestation of *Īśvara*. This is how *Īśvara* as being the material-and-efficient cause of the universe is to be understood. It is to be known that *Īśvara* is not just the maker of the universe or even the power behind the maker; He is the universe itself. To understand this better, let us take the example of a moving car. What is the power behind the movement of the car and where does it come from? It comes from the gasoline that is in the car. It is not as if the gasoline only supplies the power that moves the car. It becomes the power, which drives the car. In fact, not only does it become the power that drives the car, but it becomes the power that is the very motion of the car. We have three ideas here; gas, power, and the

motion of the car. These are not really three, but a single phenomenon manifesting in three different form. One particular form is gasoline, the other is power and the third manifestation is the mechanical motion. It is the tendency of the mind to create a division or distinction where none exists!

Let us look at yet another example. There was a time when the scientific community had not arrived at equivalence of mass and energy. In fact, they were very certain that mass and energy were two different facets of the universe. There was mass and there was energy; they were neither created nor destroyed. In 1896, when Swami Vivekananda visited the United States, he met Professor Tesla who was one of the great physicists of his time. On being asked about the possibility of a relationship between mass and energy, Tesla said that he had a few calculations that indicated that the potential energy of a body is related to its mass. After listening to Professor Tesla, Swami Vivekananda said (Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 5 p.101), ‘In that case, the *Vedāntic* cosmology will be placed on the surest of foundations. I am working a good deal now upon the cosmology and eschatology of the *Vedānta*. I clearly see their perfect unison with modern science, and the elucidation of the one will be followed by that of the other.’ Even by 1896 Physics had not grown to the level of *Vedānta*! We had to wait a few more years for Einstein to work out that mass and energy are two facets of the same *vastu*, the Reality. That *Īśvara* is the material and efficient cause of the universe is truly profound vision of *Vedānta*.

In the *Śrī Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram*, *Śrī Śaṅkara* says that the entire universe is nothing but *deśa-kāla-kalanā-vaicitrya-citrīkṛta*, the Reality differentiated within the framework of space and time. Are space and time absolute? Sir Issac Newton formulated the Laws of Motion by assuming that they were absolute. As a scientist, he knew that he could not dissociate objects from

space and time; he was not theologian to conveniently forget about space and time and talk only about the world. He postulated that the motion of objects takes place in absolute space and in absolute time and follows certain laws. It is the glory of *Śrī Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram* that space and time are not absolute and are but movements in the consciousness; they are entirely *māyākalpita*, categories of the human mind.

Space and time are nothing but superimpositions upon the Awareness that is *Brahman*. Time is the awareness of the motion of an object in space. In the absence of the cognition of motion, there is no time. Time is not an entity; it is a notion. Time exists in the mind of the observer alone; there is no time without the observer. Newton thought that time was absolute. Einstein pointed out that time is relative and depends upon the observer. *Vedic* seers and *Śrī Śaṅkara* knew this all the time! When we observe and interact with the world, it is *Īśvara* that we are really looking at and *Īśvara* we interact with. God is not extrinsic, but intrinsic to this world. In the vision of the *Vedic* seers; this universe is the glorious manifestation of *Īśvara*.

Relating to Īśvara in many different ways

This universe appears to be insentient. Did it originate from an insentient source? In fact the division into sentience and insentience, or life and non-life is not a result of any rigorous investigation and is hence superficial. If we explore the origins of the universe, the division we perceive at the gross level will not stand scrutiny. In Quantum Physics, there is no such division as ‘living’ and ‘non-living’. This divisions exists only at the intermediate level, in the manifest or gross form. The entire universe has originated from Consciousness that is Brahman. Modern Cosmology says that the universe has originated from an insentient primordial ylem. The *Vedic* vision goes forward one more step and declares that the entire universe is the manifestation of the

sentient *Brahman*. This means that every aspect of this universe is a superimposition on the sentient *Brahman* of *Īśvara* alone.

In the *R̥gveda* (1-164-46), it is said:

इन्द्रं मित्रं वरुणमग्निमाहुरथो दिव्यस्य सुपर्णो गरुत्मान् ।

एकं सद्विप्रा बहुधा वदन्त्यग्निं यमं मातरिश्वानमाहुः ॥

indram mitram varuṇamagnimāhuratho divyasya suparṇo garutmān, ekam sadviprā bahudhā vadantyaḥniṁ yamaṁ mātariśvānamāhuḥ

This infinite *ātma*, the Supreme Reality, the Existence-Absolute, is One-without-a-second. Yet the seers call it by different names such as *Indra*, *Mitra*, *Varuṇa*, *Suparṇa* (the divine eagle), *Garutmān*, *Agni*, *Yama* and *Mātariśvā*.

There is only one *sat*, Existence-Absolute. Being One indivisible undivided *sat*, it has neither beginning nor end. That is *Brahman*. When we say *ekam*, One, it is not the number one, one-third of three, etc. This One is non-dual, the One-without-second. However, this One is described in various names and forms. Why should the sages describe it in different names and forms? It is to facilitate our relating to that *sat*, that *Īśvara*, through the different aspects of his manifestation. Every aspect of the universe is a manifestation of *Īśvara*. If we do not understand its connection with *Īśvara*, the manifestation becomes *saṁsāra* and binds us.

मन एव मनुष्याणां कारणं बन्धमोक्षयोः ।

mana eva manuṣyāṇāṁ kāraṇam bandhamokṣayoḥ
(*Pañcadaśī* 6-68).

The mind alone is the cause of both the bondage and liberation of human beings.

Proper knowledge alone liberates us. Wrong ideas in the mind only serve to bind us. Every glory of this universe and, indeed every aspect of this universe can help us relate to *Īśvara*. There is no

aspect of the universe that cannot signal the presence of *Īśvara*.

When we want to relate to *Īśvara* as the ultimate cause of the universe, we can do through any one His many facets. We are familiar with the saying that there are many paths to the same destination. Whichever aspect of the universe we consider finally leads to *Īśvara* alone. Nothing in this universe is apart from *Īśvara*. The Lord has not ‘borrowed’ the raw material for the creation of the universe from somewhere else. Indeed, there is no raw material other than the Lord himself. The *Taittirīyopaniṣat* (2-6) describes the manifestation of the Lord as the universe as follows:

सोऽकामयत । बहु स्यां प्रजायेयेति ।

so’kāmayata, bahu syāṁ prajāyeyeti.

That *Brahman* desired; May I become many. May I be born.

According to the model of creation presented in *Vedānta*, *Īśvara* manifests as this very creation. Therefore the apparent plurality is but a superimposition upon *Īśvara*. If we want to see gold in a jeweller’s shop, we can see it in any one of the ornaments there because the underlying reality of all ornaments is gold alone. Similarly, every aspect of this universe reflects *Īśvara* and, whichever way we relate to it, we are really relating to *Īśvara*.

The concept of the devatā

The underlying reality of every aspect of this universe is *Brahman*. This is an important proposition and is known and understood well. The entire universe is a superimposition upon *ātman* the Awareness-Absolute. Suppose a child pulls my finger, is he not pulling me? Should he pull all of me to attract my attention? That is not necessary. Similarly, whatever be the aspect of *Īśvara* you relate to, whatever be the name of

Īśvara that you utter, whether *Rāma*, *Kṛṣṇa* or *Gaṇeṣa*, and whatever be the form you worship, it leads to the One non-dual *Brahman*.

The word *devatā* means the illumination of the consciousness. A lifeless insentient thing can never be termed a *devatā*. Everything that we perceive is an aspect of *Brahman* and, therefore, not different from *Brahman*. Therefore, it can be termed as *devatā*. We revere each of the infinite aspects of *Īśvara's* manifestation as a *devatā*, deity, and one can relate to *Īśvara* through and *devatā* that appeals.

Take the example of a rupee coin. It appears to be merely a piece of insentient metal. The underlying reality of the coin, however, is its purchasing power, which, in abundance, can help a sentient being lead a comfortable life. So the piece of metal is not so insentient after all! Wealth as an aspect through which one can appreciate the glory of *Īśvara*. Wealth is invariably associated with beauty. The beauty in nature and beauty in wealth are but glories of the Lord. Thus, the combined aspects of wealth and beauty are called *Śrī* or *Lakṣmī devatā*. No aspect of *Īśvara's* manifestation can ever be separate from him. Therefore, we say that *Śrī devatā*, the Goddess of wealth, is never away from God. In this manner, every aspect of the universe is seen as a *devatā*.

One can relate to *Īśvara* through any of his manifestations. For instance, if it is a river or a mountain, *Īśvara* becomes a river-*devatā* or a mountain-*devatā*. Look at the river *Gaṅgā* or, for that matter, any river. To an undiscerning eye, it may appear as a lifeless body of flowing water. In the vision of *Vedānta*, however, the river is but a *nāma*, name, and a *rūpa*, form, which is superimposed on *Brahman*, the Existence-Awareness-Absolute. Indeed, the underlying reality of the river is its power and influence on

life, which are the aspects of the manifestations of *Brahman*. If we are able to understand that truth, the river *Gaṅgā* is no more an insentient river; it is a *devatā*. Therefore, we call it *Gaṅgā devī*.

Think of the splendour of the Himalayan range. What a beautiful range it is. It is the mountain range in which the *Gaṅgā* and many other rivers have their origin. In the very first verse of the immortal poem *Kumārasambhava*, the poet *Kālidāsa* says:

अस्त्युत्तरस्यां दिशि देवतात्मा हिमालयो नाम नगाधिराजः

astyuttarasyaṁ diśi devatātmā himālayo nāma nagādhirājaḥ.

There is the north, is the king of mountains, called Himalayas. It is essentially a *devatā* (a manifestation of the Awareness-Absolute)

In the *Vedic* vision, Himalayas are not lifeless mountain range but truly manifestation of *Īśvara* and we regard it to be a *devatā*. All natural phenomena are *devatās*.

In life, there are always some hidden parameters that are not within our control. We take these unknown factors into account when we relate to *Īśvara* as the one who takes care of them and helps us succeed in our endeavours. *Īśvara* then becomes *Gaṇeṣa* or *Vijaya Gaṇapati*. Knowledge is another of the manifestations through which one can appreciate *Īśvara*. Knowledge then becomes another *devatā*. The name of the *devatā* is *Sarasvatī*.

The human body itself is called a *devālaya*, a temple. It is the abode of *Īśvara*. There are many *devatās* in the body. For example, the hands are a sentient faculty. They possess the faculty of holding objects. Therefore, there is a *devatā* representing this faculty. The name of the *devatā*

is *Indra*. The eyes are the faculty of vision, grasping the forms and colours of various objects. Therefore, there is a presiding *devatā* for the eyes; *Sūrya*, the sun God. The nose has the faculty of discerning smell. There are twin *devatās* for the nose, the *Aśvinīs*. *Agni* is the *devatā* of the faculty of speech. The *devatā* of the mind, the faculty of thinking, is *Candra*, the Moon. these *adhyātma devatās*, pertaining to the body-mind-sense complex, have counterparts in the *adhibhūta*, the cosmos created from the five elements, Thus, we can extrapolate this microcosm to the macrocosm and vice versa. In this context, is called the *Virāṭ Puruṣa*, the Cosmic Person. Every aspect of the cosmos is like His limb. He has various limbs and each limb is a *devatā*. All these manifestations of that *Īśvara* alone. Thus, every aspect of life or the universe can signify *Īśvara* and is looked upon a *devatā*, This accounts for the apparent plurality of *devatā*.

Īśvara transcends gender

Īśvara has no gender and is needed beyond gender, even though the words that are used to describe *Īśvara* have a gender associated with them. Gender is the property of the body alone; beyond the body, there is no gender. In fact, all our faculties such as the sense organs, the mind, and the intellect, as well as the *ahaṅkāra* or ego, the *sākṣī* or witnessing Awareness, and *ātman* transcend gender.

That which sets the language of Sanskrit apart from most language is that the gender of a word is not always connected to its meaning. There are three words that have the same meaning, but are different in gender. For example, there are three words *taṭaḥ*, *taṭī*, and *taḥam* in the masculine, feminine, and neuter genders respectively, all of which mean the bank of a river. There are other

words such as *dārāḥ*, wife, in the masculine gender, which illustrates that the linguistic gender and biological gender can be different. In many instances, such as the word *Rāmaḥ*, the two genders coincide. It is interesting that the term *caitanya*, awareness has three synonyms: *daivam*, *devā* and *devatā*; *daivam* is in the neuter, *devaḥ* in the masculine, and *devatā* in the feminine. From the viewpoint of *vyākaraṇa*, Sanskrit grammar, you can use any of these words. For example, you can say, “*Rāmo mama daivam*” to mean that ‘Lord *Rāma* is my (personal) God.’ Here, *daivam* is in the neuter gender. You can also say, “*Rāmo mama devaḥ*”, or “*Rāmo mama devatā*”. Therefore, we can use any one of the three words, even though their gender differ.

The *Upaniṣads* always present *Brahman* as *ātman*, the innermost reality of the individual. *Brahman*, however, is beyond the scope of language. The description can never be the same as the described. Yet words are used to indicate the ineffable *Brahman*. While using words, the grammatical gender cannot be avoided. For example, consider the *mahāvākya*, the great statement, of the *Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣat* (2)

अयमात्मा ब्रह्म ।

ayamātmā brahma

This *ātman* is *Brahman*. In this statement, the words *ayam*, this, and *ātmā* are both masculine in gender. However, this supreme reality is described in feminine terms in *Chāndogyopaniṣat* (6-3-2):

सेयं देवतैक्षत ----- नामरूपे व्याकरवाणि ।

seyam devataikṣata ----- nāmarūpe vyākaraṇvāṇi

That this *Brahman* visualized (desired) ---- that I would manifest(as) names and forms.

Here the words *seyam*, that this, and *devatā*, *Brahman*, are in feminine gender. *Ātman* is described in the neuter gender as well in the *mahāvākya* of the *Chāndogyaopaniṣat* (6-9-4):

तत्सत्यं स आत्मा तत्त्वमसि ।

tatsatyam sa ātmā tattvamasi

That is the Truth. That is *ātman*. That art thou

Here, the words *tat*, that, and *satyam*, truth, are in the neuter gender. Whatever be the words used to point to *Brahman*, the fact is that *Brahman* transcends gender; only the physical body has gender.

Hinduism is not polytheistic

There could be a number of deities and shrines in a temple, representing the *Rāma parivāra*, *Śiva parivāra*, *Viṣṇu parivāra* or *Devī parivāra*, *parivāra* meaning family. The temple seems to represent many Gods. Do we worship a multitude of Gods? It is not so. Unless properly understood, this form of worship may be misinterpreted as being polytheism or paganism; one could look at the myriad names presented in the literature and label Hinduism as polytheistic. Some Hindus are themselves confused and unable to explain properly to others. Advaita is no monotheism. People translate dvaita as dualism or polythesism and advaita as monothesis. This kind of translation is simplistic and misleading. It is the Abrahamic faiths that are monotheistic. They maintain that there is One God, who is external to this world, and say that there are many Gods in Hinduism. However, this is not what Hinduism represents. In fact, in Hindu Philosophy, there is no 'one' God; there is 'only' the Godhead. This is the highest truth. Thus the *Chāndogyaopaniṣat* (3-14-1) declares:

सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म तज्जलान् ।

sarvam khalvidam brahma tajjalān.

All this originated from *Brahman*, all this exists in *Brahman*, and all this resolves in *Brahman*. Therefore, all this, indeed is *Brahman*.

This being so, where is this plurality of Gods? How can the *Vedic* seers deny the plurality of the entire universe and, at the same time, maintain the plurality of Gods as a reality? We can relate to the glory of *Īśvara* through any of the aspects of his manifestation. When you look at a child, you are looking at *Brahman*; when you look at fire, you are looking at *Brahman*; when you look at the water in the ocean, you are looking at *Brahman*. or when you look at the Himalayas or the Poconos in the USA, you are looking at *Brahman*. We consider each of these aspects to be *devatā*. In doing so, we adore the glory of *Īśvara* through that aspect of manifestation. We also have a *mantra*, a sacred hymn or utterance of the *Veda*, in praise of his glory through that aspect.

Notwithstanding the apparent plurality, *Brahma*, One-without-second, is the reality of the universe and this message is aptly conveyed by the *Vedic* declaration '*sarvam khalvidam brahma*'. *Brahman* has manifested in the form of this vast universe, including you and me. How many facets could there be in the manifestation of *Īśvara*? infinite! Therefore, we have infinite modes of relating to *Īśvara*. In Hindu culture, it is indeed said that each seeker has his or her own personal God, which is that form or aspect of the Godhead most appealing to his mind for worship and contemplation. As Lord *Śrī Kṛṣṇa* declares in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (10-12):

अहमात्मा गुडाकेश सर्वभूताशयस्थितः ।

अहमादिश्च मध्यं च भूतानामन्त एव च ॥

ahamātmā guḍākeśa sarvabhūtāśayasthitaḥ

ahamādiśca madhyaṁ ca bhūtānāmanta eva ca

O *Arjuna!* I am the innermost reality abiding in the hearts of all living beings. I am the beginning (origin), middle (substatum of existence), and end (the substratum of resolution) of all the things of the universe.

[from Vaidika Sūta Mañjarī with the commentary Tattva Prakāśikā by Pūjya Swami Tattvaśāstrī Sarasvatī]