

I Am

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I Am

On a daily basis we use sentences starting with I am and to the blank space we add a adjective (like I am tall, I am a thinker, I am a father, I am young) There are so many adjectives which can be added to the blank space that it is impossible to list all of them.

What do these sentences really mean? We definitely use these types of sentences quite often in our daily conversation, but we pay no or very little attention to what this really means. We are so used to it and we take it for granted. We generally understand that these types of sentences are referring or talking about ourselves. There are so many adjectives which can be added to the 'I am'. If you ask anyone, which of these hundreds of adjectives is the real you, it will be difficult for anyone to give a proper answer. Besides any adjective added to 'I am' just gives one quality or feature to 'I am', it will never give a complete essence of what 'I' or 'I am' really means. This is where the problem is, no one really knows who they really are. If you answer you are this body, then the next question which part of the body are you? You may answer you are the heart or brain. The next question is – are you located in the frontal lobe of the brain or the left ventricle of the heart. This game can continue and you will never get the exact answer. This ignorance plays havoc on how we live and how we understand who we really are and how we perceive all the objects of the world, and all of our emotions and feelings.

Unless and until someone digs deeper into these types of sentences, it will be impossible for us to get a better understanding of what these sentences really mean. This knowledge is critical. We are not talking about knowledge, like trying to learn Chinese or trying to master biology. This knowledge is trying to understand our essential nature. This is the most important knowledge we can learn in our lifetime, it has many positive benefits; it can help remove suffering, and gives us the peace of mind for which we are striving on a daily basis. If we look into ourselves, we will have to agree that the amount of importance we give to understanding this knowledge is a low priority. We are too involved in our daily routines, and most of us have no time to explore this issue. This is unfortunate.

We are very lucky that ancient Rishis and Sages from India have given us these teachings in many Indian scriptures. This knowledge is available to us, but the problem is that scriptures are written in Sanskrit and also in poetical form that is not always easy to understand. It is not easy for an ordinary person to gain this knowledge on their own. You have to find a suitable guru who has solid grounding in Vedanta and who can teach this complex subject in simple and direct language. In this regard, I have been blessed to have Swami Tadatmananda as my teacher. Whatever I have learned is only because of him. In this article I will try my best to share the knowledge I have gained from my teacher.

I am (add an adjective)

As mentioned earlier a whole range of adjectives can be added to I am, here a list of examples.

- I am young, I am male, I am 64 years old, I am tired, I am happy, I am a son, and I am an employee

Let us focus on 'I am young'. We will now break this simple sentence into a combination of 3 groups and we will discuss each of them separately.

- a. 'I'
- b. 'I am'
- c. 'I am young'

On the face of it there is nothing much happening in each combination, but as we shall see there is a big difference between each one of them. The 'I' is referring to your True Self, the 'I am' is referring to your sense of individuality which is usually seated in the mind and 'I am young, I am a thinker etc.' is referring to your Ahamkara or Ego, which is like your resume or bio-data listing all your characteristics. All this is going to be discussed in more detail:

a. 'I'

'I' is a pronoun and it can stand by itself. This standalone 'I' does not need to be connected to anything internal (mind) or external (body), it is self sufficient and independent. 'I' is your true Self. In Vedanta it is called Atma. The main role of the 'I' or Atma is to witness what happens in your mind and we know the mind is full of activity. This "I" is just a Witness and it never influences, neither it is affected by what is happening in the mind. It is like a witnessing a movie which is running in your mind. Though in real life a sad movie can make someone cry, but in this case the Atma is never affected by the movie running in the mind. The Atma is the Subject or Observer and everything which is happening in your mind is the Object or Observed.

According to the scriptures the nature of this Atma or 'I' is 'Sat Chit Ananda'. In reality it is impossible to know the Atma. The Atma is not an object or thing to be known, it is the Subject which observes things or objects. If you think about it, it is only logical nothing can be known of the Observer. Therefore according to the scriptures 'Sat Chit Ananda' is not an adjective for Atma, but it only indicates or points towards the essential nature of the Atma. Let us now discuss what we mean by 'Sat Chit Ananda'.

Sat: Sat means Real. If you look up any dictionary you will get a wide variety of meaning for 'real'. This dictionary meaning is not good for understanding 'Sat'. According to Vedanta, for anything to be Sat, it must exist and be present in all the 3 tenses – past, present and future. If you look into nature, you will not find anything which is Sat.

- This universe was born 13.7 billion years ago and therefore it did not exist before that, so it cannot be Sat, also we know if anything is born it must die. So Sat must be unborn and anything which is unborn must be uncreated (to make it existent forever).
- Everything which is born must have a cause. You were born because of your parents and they were born because of their parents. Since Sat is unborn it is also uncaused. No cause created it, it was, and it will be always present.
- If anything changes in anyway small, e.g. (atoms have been displaced) or big, e.g. (planetary positions are different), it is not the same as what it was before. Therefore it cannot be Sat, because Sat is unchanging.

Atma or 'I' is Sat and it is uncreated, uncaused and unchanging.

Chit: Chit means Awareness. Many books will also translate this as Consciousness, but I feel this is not very accurate. When the mind comes into contact with this Chit or Awareness that mind becomes Conscious. The essential nature of Atma is Awareness. This Awareness has no edge or boundary, it is limitless. Basically it is everywhere and everything in the universe is Awareness, or full of awareness. There cannot be a single spot or area where this Awareness is not present. To visualize this, look at the sun's rays, which is everywhere in the solar system.

If you look at Awareness more closely, you will realize Awareness must always have two elements.

1. If you are aware, then there should be someone who is aware. Awareness needs a subject
2. To be aware, there must be some type of object of which you are aware of. Awareness needs an object

Subject and object are needed to complete the Awareness process. Usually Subject and Object are separate, but in Chit there is no separate subject and object, Chit is always Self Aware, it is aware of its awareness (it is witnessing its awareness). It is both the subject and object rolled in one. Chit is therefore self sufficient and complete. We shall show later on that due to ignorance, the subject and object become separate. This is what it seems for an ignorant person.

Here is an appropriate quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian sage who explains the difference between Awareness and Consciousness

"Awareness is primordial; it is the original state, beginningless, endless, uncaused, and unsupported, without parts, without change. Consciousness is on contact, a reflection against a surface, a state of duality. There can be no consciousness without awareness, but there can be awareness without consciousness, as in deep sleep. Awareness is absolute, consciousness is relative to its content; consciousness is always of something. Consciousness is partial and changeful; awareness is total, changeless, calm and silent. And it is the common matrix of every experience." (from "I Am That", chapter 11)

Like the sun which glows, the Chit also glows with Awareness and is present everywhere. Anything which comes in touch with Chit becomes Conscious. Because the objects become conscious, only then Atma or 'I' can witness these objects. Anything you witness in this world is because those objects become "conscious" - because of the light of Atma or your true nature.

Ananda: Your essential nature is Ananda or Bliss. This term can be confusing because we do get momentary bliss in our day to day lives and this is not the Ananda we are talking about.

Basically there are two types of Ananda or bliss

- **Vishesha Ananda** This is the bliss or happiness we get from objects. We know and experience this bliss, it is momentary and it comes and goes. Vedanta has a complete explanation how this process works, but this is not the place to discuss this.
- **Swarupa Ananda:** Swarupa Ananda means your essential nature is Ananda or Bliss. We saw earlier that the Chit is both the Subject and Object. This means 'I' is complete and full; it is self sufficient and does not need anything else. This condition of completeness and fullness gives 'I' continuous and unbroken Ananda or Bliss. The reason we do not experience this type of bliss on a continuous basis is because we have forgotten who we are, due to our ignorance. This is our next topic of discussion.

Summary

The 'I' is the witness to what is going on in our minds. This 'I' is our essential nature and it is Uncreated, Uncaused and Unchanging. It is also Self Aware, it is Limitless and Blissful.

b. 'I am'

Due to ignorance we have forgotten the 'I' and our essential nature of 'Sat, Chit, Ananda'. We do not realize it, but this ignorance is extremely powerful and we could say that it comes with three shaktis or powers

- A “Veiling” Power
- A “Projecting” Power
- A Power of “Mutual Superimposition”

To explain these powers, the classic example which is given in Vedanta is the Rope/Snake example. In a dark night with limited visibility, there is a rope on our path., but, instead of seeing the rope we see a snake. I am sure we all have experienced this one time or another. If there were no ignorance, we would never see the snake; we would straight away know there is a rope out there. So, the snake has been created by our ignorance. How does ignorance create the snake?

First, the veiling power of ignorance covers up the rope completely so that the rope is not visible. As a second step, the projection power of ignorance projects the snake on to the rope. Finally, the power of mutual superimposition, superimposes the rope’s qualities on the snake, and the snake’s qualities on the rope. The shape and size of the rope are transferred to the ‘snake’. The awesome and fearful qualities of the ‘snake’ are being superimposed on the rope. So, looking at this superimposed snake in the shape of the rope you get scared and frightened.

Ignorance is indeed very powerful and deep rooted. It has been with us since we were born and if you believe in reincarnation, it has also been with you in your earlier births. Let us see how ignorance transforms ‘I’ - your essential nature to ‘I am’, which is your sense of individuality, which is your mind. ‘I’, which is limitless becomes ‘I am’ which is limited. This is the ‘I am’ you know and experience every day.

We will now focus on the veiling and super imposition aspects of ignorance.

The same veiling power of ignorance covers up ‘I’ your essential nature; you don’t know you are the ‘I’. You don’t know you are ‘Sat Chit Ananda’, you don’t know you are Uncreated, Unchanging, Limitless, Blissful and Self Aware. With mutual superimposition, the qualities of the ‘I’ and Ignorance are mutually interchanged. The new entity created is ‘I am’. The Awareness part of the ‘I’ is superimposed on Ignorance to make it Conscious and nature of the ignorance which is always limited and incomplete is superimposed on ‘I’ or Atma to create the ‘I am’. This ‘I am’ is the root and foundation of the mind. The mind we know is made up of ‘I am’; it is conscious and no longer limitless but due to ignorance it feels limited and incomplete. It must be understood the ‘I am’ is different for everyone because everyone has a different amount of ignorance; some are more ignorant than others. This ignorance has nothing to do with not knowing objects, for e.g., not knowing Chinese when you make the statement “I don’t know Chinese”, but is directly related to the lack of Awareness you have about your real ‘I’.

This ‘I am’ is the basis of the mind which is limited. This ‘I am’ has two aspects –

- “Karta” (doer of all actions): The ‘I am’ Doer initiates all the karmas (actions), and the reason it initiates actions is because it has forgotten its true nature and is looking for the missing “Anada”, happiness. This desire to find happiness is the reason why any karma is initiated.
- “Bhokta” (receiver of the all the results of actions): Once the action has been completed it must also receive the results and consequences of all its actions. It could be the consequence of ‘punya’ karma (positive) or ‘papa’ karma (negative). ‘I am’ is the Bhokta of these consequences.

As part of mutual superimposition, it must be clearly understood that the ‘I’ part of the ‘I am’ is still the witness of all the events in the mind without attachment; this is happening right now in each and every experience. Only ‘I’ has the capacity to witness the events in your mind - no one or nothing else can. In this way, the Atma or ‘I’ is hidden in plain sight. It is present in every experience we witness. The ‘am’ part of the ‘I am’ superimposes itself to what is being witnessed in the mind. By this superimposition, the ‘am’ part or the mind adds its own emotion, feeling, attitude to what is being witnessed. It is adding its opinion or comments to what is being witnessed. The mind loves to do this; this ‘opinion making’ is the essential nature of the mind. I like what is being witnessed or I do not like what is being witnessed. This ‘like (Raga)’/’do not like (Dvesha)’ is what is usually added to every experience that is being witnessed.

What is Witnessing? It is watching what is happening in the mind with no attachment or opinions about its content. Atma or ‘I’ does this witnessing

What is Experiencing? When you watch what is happening in your mind with the addition of your opinion about the content. Mind or ‘I am’ does this experiencing.

Let us take an example – ‘I feel sad’. ‘I’ witnesses the sadness in the mind without attachment or comments. The ‘am’ part which is ignorance imposes the ‘feeling’ part to the ‘I’, therefore the entity (your mind) ‘I am’ feels sadness or becomes sad.

Witnesser (I) + Superimposition/Opinions (am) = Experiencer (I am)

c. ‘I am young’

‘I am young’ is just an example, you could add any adjective instead of ‘young’. In the last section we saw that due to ignorance, the ‘I am’ forgets its essential nature, instead it feels limited and is looking for its missing eternal happiness. It is restless and unhappy.

Let us look at this in another way. Earlier we discussed that 'I' is Sat Chit Ananda and the Chit which is Self Aware has both the Subject and Object element in it rolled as one, there is no separation. Due to ignorance, 'I' becomes 'I am' and this 'I am' is a Subject. It is no longer Self Aware, because the Object aspect of the "I" is missing. It therefore feels incomplete and is looking to complete itself.

The projection power of ignorance completes this task; it creates a Body which 'I am' thinks is the missing Object. The 'I am' attaches and identifies itself with this body. With this body, 'I am' now feels it is complete and it thinks it can also find the missing happiness. The projecting power of ignorance creates several types of bodies with which the 'I am' thinks it is completing itself.

- Physical Body:
- Manas: This is the seat for perception and all the possible emotions
- Buddhi: This is the seat of free will, reasoning and decision making.

The Manas and Buddhi are part of the subtle body and the better known term for this is the 'mind'. Here also mutual superimposition takes place. The qualities of Atma or 'I' are superimposed on each of the bodies; physical, Manas and Buddhi. This way the physical body, Manas and Buddhi, all become conscious. Collectively they feel they are real and are the 'I'. The qualities of the physical body, manas and buddhi are also superimposed on Atma or 'I'. All the limitations of the physical/subtle body are superimposed on the Atma or 'I'. This is the reason we make statements like:

I am thin – The thinness is the function of the physical body and it has nothing to do with the Atma or 'I'. Due to ignorance we superimpose this quality of the body onto Atma.

I am sad – Sadness is the quality of the mind and not of Atma or 'I'. Again due to ignorance we superimpose this quality of the mind onto Atma.

I have a head ache – The head ache belongs to the physical body, but we superimpose this on the Atma or 'I'. The 'I' is just the witness of the headache and never part of it.

This list of such superimpositions can go on. Once again the underlying reason for making this type of superimposition is ignorance. Can you imagine how deep rooted this ignorance is? This ignorance is accumulated over all our past lifetimes.

The 'I am' and the Body are deeply attached and interconnected. In fact 'I am' is the boss and body is a servant. We saw the 'I am' is the doer of the action; it initiates the action by giving instruction to the body. The body follows the instructions and completes the action. 'I am' has a desire for sweets. It will make the body go to the fridge and make it eat the 'gulab jamun'. Till

this does not happen, 'I am' will be restless. Once this task is completed, 'I am' feels a sense of happiness. This is momentary, in no time 'I am' will have another desire, so another action starts and 'I am' will not find peace till that desire has fulfilled. This is a never ending cycle we follow in our daily life. The 'I am' is located in the Buddhi and is the boss of the body/mind complex.

With this interconnection of the 'I am' and the body, a new entity Ahamkara or Ego is created. To understand this, let us see a typical day of Ahamkara or Ego.

- I get up in the morning and go for a walk. I am a Walker
- I do some meditation. I am a mediator.
- I have my breakfast. I am an Eater
- I get into my car and go to the office. I am a Driver
- I manage my staff in the office. I am a Boss
- I have a meeting with my boss. I am a Subordinate
- I am thinking how to improve sales. I am a Thinker
- I return home. I am a Husband
- I play with the kids. I am a Father
- I talk to my parents. I am a Son
- I watch some TV. I am a Watcher
- I go to sleep. I am a Sleeper
- I have a dream. I am a Dreamer
- I see something. I am a Seer
- I taste food. I am a Taster
- I smell food. I am a Smeller
- I listen to sounds. I am a Listener

Can you imagine how many different roles we play every day? Fortunately we are not suffering from schizophrenia; otherwise we would have to deal with so many different personalities. If you notice 'I am' is common for all the roles we play, there is only one 'I am'. This common 'I am' with all the possible roles we play is part of our Ahamkara or Ego. This Ahamkara is like your resume, it will describe who you are and also list all the possible roles you play. As we learn new ones, they are added to the list. When you start playing a role, Ahamkara undergoes change and it plays that role. When the situation changes, the 'I am' will change and play the role for the new situation. This 'I am' is very versatile and adaptable.

Besides the roles mentioned earlier, the 'I am' also adds 'mineness' to a wide variety of external objects. This is done because 'I am' thinks it will find the missing happiness in these external

objects. The 'I am' identifies and attaches with these external objects by making the following types of statements

- My Car
- My dream car
- My Money
- My dream bank balance
- My Home on the beach
- My Smartphone
- My Friends
- My Vacation
- This list can go on.....

People talk about double roles for an actor in a movie, but imagine the different roles we play every day. The advantage for the actor is that he knows he is acting out a scene; a sad or happy scene really does not affect him. Unfortunately, we do not have this detached attitude; we are completely involved and attached to all the roles we play. If there is a conflict or argument, the 'I am' also gets angry. If a situation generates feelings of hurt, 'I am' feels the hurt. These multifaceted roles and their side effects only mean that there is very little happiness and peace for 'I am', the role player. The sole aim of playing these roles is to find happiness, but this definitely seems to be out of reach. There is too much pressure playing all these roles and there is inner conflict between the different roles.

There are times you get attached to one type of a role and this affects all the other roles. You play the boss in the office and you continue to do so when you get back home, this can create tension and unpleasantness with your spouse and children.

It would seem the 'I am' is not finding the required completeness and happiness with the different roles it is playing. The 'I am' extends its reach by adding 'mineness' to wide variety of external objects. The 'I am' identifies and attaches itself to these

The real solution is never to get attached to any of the roles you play. We have to learn that the 'I' in all these situations is just the Witness and our essential nature is Sat, Chit Ananda. Once we gain this knowledge, the ignorance will disappear and we will know all the roles being played are just roles. We should have the attitude of the actor who performs different roles, and these roles never affect him. He is always aware he is just an actor playing different roles.

Theoretical understanding of this knowledge is just not enough; this knowledge must be assimilated completely in our day to day functioning. It must be with us 24/7/365. Till this does not happen you have to keep trying, it is a nonstop struggle. Vedanta shows us different

methods by which this knowledge can be completely assimilated but this is not the focus of this article.

Conclusion

We have made detailed analysis of the statement 'I am'. We have shown that the essential nature of 'I' is Sat, Chit, Ananda and how ignorance of this fact can take you into a path which only leads to unhappiness and suffering. It is important to learn and understand your true nature and assimilate this in your day to day functioning. This is not easy, but it should be everyone's goal, not a goal in a long list of goals, but the ONLY goal. Only then can we remove suffering in this life time.