

From Ontology to Aesthetics  
A Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Interpretation of an Upaniṣadic Passage 'So 'ham'

Kiyokazu Okita  
University of Oxford / University of Hamburg

The Upaniṣads contain two types of passages, namely those which declare the unity between Brahman and the *jīva* (*abheda-śruti*), and those which declare the difference between them (*bheda-śruti*). One of the greatest challenges to all the schools of Vedānta is to reconcile these seemingly contradictory statements and establish a cohesive system of thought. The proponents of absolute monism (*kevalādvaita*) develop their system, focusing on the *abheda-śrutis* such as '*ahaṃ brahmāsmi*' at the expense of the *bheda-śrutis*, whereas the proponents of Vaiṣṇava Vedānta attempt to reconcile those *abheda-śrutis* with the *bheda-śrutis* in such a way that they will fit into their theistic scheme.

An Upaniṣadic passage '*so 'ham*' is one of the *abheda-śrutis*, which occurs in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, the *Īśa Upaniṣad*, and the *Gopāla-tāpanī Upaniṣad*. While other schools of Vedānta interpret this passage from an ontological perspective, Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa, a Gauḍīya Vedāntist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century offers an aesthetic interpretation of the passage, based on his examination of the *Gopāla-tāpanī Upaniṣad* in his commentary on the *Vedānta-sūtras* called the *Govinda-bhāṣya*.

One of the contributions of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, which was inaugurated by Kṛṣṇa Caitanya in the fifteenth Century, to the history of Indian thought is that it developed a refined theory of devotional sentiment (*rasa*). According to the school, the highest sentiment is expressed in the cowherdesses' (Gopīs') love for Kṛṣṇa, which is portrayed in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. In his commentary on the *Vedānta-sūtras* 3.3.46-7, Baladeva applies this theory to the interpretation of the Upaniṣadic passage and says that the passage expresses the state of consciousness attained by the cowherdesses in their extreme emotional pain caused by separation from Kṛṣṇa.

In this paper, I will first briefly discuss the interpretations of the Upaniṣadic passage which are offered by the schools of Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and

Dvaita Vedānta. Then I will examine Baladeva's interpretation of the passage based on his *Govinda-bhāṣya* 3.3.46-7 and argue that Baladeva offers a distinct solution to deal with the tension between the *bheda-śrutis* and the *abheda-śrutis* by shifting the focus of his discussion from ontology to devotional aesthetics.