

Advaita – Mind Over Reality



The Founders of Advaita Vedanta

Advaita is not so much a spiritual path as a philosophy, a highly intellectualized vision of reality. It has risen to popularity in the West largely due to Ramana Maharishi, a great sage who chose to articulate his self-experience through the philosophy of Advaita, even though he himself did not follow the teachings of Advaita on his path to self-realization. The concept of non-duality, which sits at the heart of Advaita, is very old. It can be found in the ancient Brahma Sutras of Bādarāyana and the teachings of Gaudapada. Gaudapada was Govinda Bhagavatpāda's teacher, and he in turn was Adi Shankara's guru. However, it was Shankara who, in the 8th century, gave Advaita Vedanta its final, recognizable shape and who became its most influential expounder. Adi Shankara was not a practical teacher, but a religious reformer and philosopher who travelled across the Indian subcontinent to propagate his philosophy through discourses and debates with other thinkers. His objective was to 'defeat' Buddhism and Jainism and to revive and purify Hinduism, which at that time was composed of many disparate and conflicting sects. He also wanted to reinstate Hinduism as the main religion in India.

While Shankara was against Buddhism, he was fond of Buddha himself. This is unsurprising, as Buddha's success as a teacher had impressed many adepts of varying religious allegiances, including the eccentric Hare Krishnas who considered Buddha to be an incarnation of Vishnu. Shankara called Buddha "An emperor of yogis in the Kali age." This statement, coupled with the fact that Shankara

incorporated some Buddhist concepts into his own philosophy, has led many to accuse him of being a ‘Buddhist in disguise.’ But we could just as well say that Buddha was a Hindu in disguise, as many of the main ideas in Buddhism, such as the negative perception of existence and need for ‘moksha’ (liberation), were taken directly from Hinduism.

Shankara was critical of many other paths as well. Among other things, he did not approve of yoga as a means for reaching liberation; while he considered it to be potentially useful as a preparatory practice, he did not see it as a way to gain direct knowledge of the self. In his view, the knowledge of ‘brahman’ manifested from inquiry into the words of the *Upanishads*, the ancient scriptures that speak of the unity of ‘atman’ and brahman. Shankara’s philosophy is called Advaita Vedanta because it perceives Advaita to be the essence of the *Upanishads*, otherwise known as ‘Vedanta’, which means ‘the culmination of Vedas.’

The two other influential thinkers who taught Vedanta (but not Advaita) during that era were Madha and Ramanuja. Ramanuja taught ‘qualified non-duality,’ in which atman is considered to be one with brahman but not the same as him. Madha, on the other hand, taught ‘dvaita’, which posited a clear duality between atman and brahman. When these thinkers constructed their arguments, they aimed to prove that their interpretations were the correct exegeses of what was written in the scriptures. For them, the Vedas were the ultimate authority, like the Torah is for orthodox Jews today or the Bible is for Christians. The problem is that most of the scriptures carry equivocal messages which can be interpreted in both dual and non-dual ways; hence all these arguments and intellectual battles can never be resolved. Most of Shankara’s writings were actually commentaries on various ancient texts. It seems that, despite his dry intellectualism, he was deeply devotional and very emotionally attached to the Hindu tradition.

What is Advaita?

Advaita, which means ‘not-two,’ is what is called ‘monism.’ The difference between monism and non-duality is that non-duality is not an affirmation of reality as ‘one,’ but rather a negation of its ‘two-ness.’ The concept of non-duality was created to describe the relationship between atman (soul) and brahman (universal self). brahman is considered to be the substratum of existence without attributes (nirguna). When the world is perceived in separation from brahman, it is called ‘maya’ or illusion. The Hindu



metaphor for the veil of illusion is a rope that is mistaken for a snake; when one realizes it is not a snake, one becomes free from fear. In a similar way, when the world is seen as the manifestation of brahman, that world becomes real (it is no longer the snake of maya). To put it simply, there are three stages of realization in Advaita: that brahman is real; that the world is an illusion; that there is only brahman.

In non-duality, atman is not only thought to be one with brahman, but identical to it: atman is brahman – “I am That” (aham brahman asmi). All is one, all is brahman. However, to avoid the paradox that the concept of oneness requires its opposite (which is duality), the nature of reality is instead defined in negative terms as non-dual – ‘Advaita.’ To put it simply, the meaning of the non-dual ‘relationship’ between atman and brahman in non-duality is that they are one and the same, meaning there is no relationship at all.

In the *Upanishads*, atman is compared to the space inside a clay pot. The space inside and outside of the pot are the same, but the illusory walls of the pot make its inner space appear distinct. This false distinction is caused by the illusion of identification with form (rupa). When the pot is broken (the death of the body) those two spaces become one. However, through correct understanding and self-actualization, the realization that the space inside and outside the pot are one can be made without breaking it, meaning within the living body. Here, form is not destroyed, but its identification with a distinct sense of self is dissolved – this is enlightenment. Using this metaphor, we can say that ‘oneness’ signifies that the space inside the pot is inherently one with the space outside the pot, while ‘non-duality’ means that they are ‘not-separate.’ On some level, non-duality represents a deeper level of oneness because duality, as the prerequisite of unity, is entirely by-passed.

Based on this philosophy, Advaita shares the same view of awakening as ‘jnana yoga,’ the yoga of knowledge. It states that, by mental exertion, self-inquiry or internal contemplation, we can realize our true self. We can find similar ideas in Zen, for instance, or in the teaching of Krishnamurti. And while understanding is indeed very important, in itself it has very limited power to produce the event of awakening. Additionally, even if, in an ideal scenario, we manage to trigger the awakening of the state beyond the mind, we are still far from being self-realized. For instance, the realization of pure consciousness is just the beginning of evolution into our complete self. Many traditions imagine that by removing avidya (ignorance), envisioned as the ‘dust’ that covers our pure nature, we immediately shift into our perfect and complete self. But nothing could be further from the truth.



We should not forget that the Advaita taught by Shankara was Advaita Vedanta. Nowadays, those who follow a commercialized form of Advaita have little to no knowledge of Vedanta. Can one really be a follower of Advaita without studying the *Upanishads*? This is a contradiction in terms. Shankara would probably consider such people illiterate and unworthy self-knowledge.

It is actually quite difficult to say exactly what Advaita is, because there are so many variants and interpretations of its philosophy. Whether Ramana Maharishi taught true Advaita is debatable. He was, in fact, teaching his own version of the philosophy of Shankara, mixed with other Hindu teachings. The same applies to Nisargadatta Maharaj - he created his own adaptation of Advaita. Indeed, even during Shankara's own lifetime there were many disagreements as to the correct readings of Advaita and Vedanta. Our main concern here, however, is not about precisely pinpointing the philosophy of Advaita, but rather extracting its practical applications. How has the concept of non-duality affected our understanding of spiritual evolution and our concept of enlightenment?

What is the Soul and is Atman Real?

When we ask 'Is atman one with brahman?' is it really the correct question? Many religions, spiritual paths and philosophies drown in endless speculation about the soul: Is the soul eternal? Is she one with god? And so forth. It is often assumed that the soul is the perfect essence we all have inside, but have we really? To debate whether non-duality, qualified non-duality or strict duality is correct is to seek answers to the wrong question. Why? Because one actually has to have a soul before one can begin to wonder about her relationship with the absolute reality. Initially, the soul cannot be dual, or non-dual, or both dual and non-dual, or neither dual nor non-dual in her relationship to brahman, because she simply does not exist. Nobody is there, just an entirely fragmented psychological self which is barely conscious of its own existence.

So, unless the process of soul-actualization is separated and differentiated from reaching unity with the universal reality, there is no way we can even come close to grasping the nature of spiritual evolution and of the path. Attempting to realize unity or non-duality with universal reality, either by intellectual speculation or self-negation, before we have a real soul to speak of, is a complete misunderstanding. It is also the fundamental flaw in the technology of evolution and self-realization proposed by Advaita.



On some level, the main contribution of Buddhism was to dispel the myth of the soul as our inherent essence and birthright; it cut straight through that ancient superstition. However, the error of Buddhism was to stop at that negation and affirm the absence of self as the universal principle. In truth, nobody has a soul, not because she has no existential existence, but because she has to be actualized in order to exist.

Why did great Advaita masters speak about non-duality as the highest truth, if it is not? There is a naive belief that, if one obtains the enlightened state, by default one also embodies the correct understanding of that state. According to this assumption, an enlightened person would undoubtedly know whether reality is indeed dual or non-dual. But this is not necessarily true. Even if a person does reach a profound inner realization, they can still lack the proper knowledge and requisite level of intelligence to identify the meaning of it. If one is a fool, one is a fool – even self-realization cannot change that. Only when our intelligence truly reflects the nature of the awakened state can we realize awakening and understanding as one. In the majority of cases, they are far from being one. Spiritual intelligence usually lags behind the internal evolution of the soul, simply because it takes many lifetimes to develop.¹

The bottom line is that, because past traditions of enlightenment do not include the realization of our higher individuality in their vision, they tend to see enlightenment as a leap from the false self into samadhi in the universal reality: a leap into a radical re-identification with the universal reality. So the assumption is that no one needs to be in samadhi, because there is only brahman, or non-self. But again, how can we reach unity with the pure nature of existence if we do not possess a substantial identity of our own? The answer that Advaita gives is that we are essentially no different from brahman. Therefore, all we need to do is remove the illusion of being separated. Those who find comfort in such concepts have no sensitivity or respect for their inimitable subjectivity. Through the crude logic of non-duality they justify their numbness to their most intimate existence and deny who they are. In the pursuit

¹ To take Ramana Maharishi as an example, he was in fact highly intelligent, but his views were very conditioned by Hindu spirituality. Living in his profound state of surrender, he simply did not notice that his soul was distinct from the self in which it was constantly absorbed. Perhaps he also did not care to notice, because realizing his higher individuality was not his own deepest desire. Even so, when he pointed to his heart as the seat of the self, it was indeed his soul that he was experiencing.



of an insipid concept of enlightenment, they go against the very purpose of their existence and fail to give birth to their soul. This is how that very ignorance (avidya) they sought to transcend returns through the back door to infiltrate itself into spirituality, in the guise of soulless ‘enlightenment.’

Advaita - Mind over Reality

What can be appreciated about Advaita is that it was never institutionalized; it has never become a religion. Though based on the study of the *Upanishads*, it was originally a pathless path which pointed directly to reality. The down side of this is that it became extremely impractical; it did not offer any tangible tools on how to achieve these deep realizations. As a result of the fact adepts of Advaita could not experientially actualize the essence of Vedanta just by studying scriptures or doing self-inquiry, the figure of the guru gradually came to be elevated to the position of the one who bestows the magic of enlightenment. Without the master’s grace, the path of Advaita is nothing more than a mental construct: the fantasy of understanding of something that can never be attained.

Advaita gives the illusion of being logical, of using logical arguments to convince the mind that reality is non-dual. However, the linear logic of the mind cannot even begin to reflect the nature of reality. It is just the mind talking to itself. The truly trans-linear logic of reality can only arise from the soul, from our deeper consciousness. This ‘logic’ is intuitive and capable of sensing and feeling the most subtle dimensions of our existence. The logic of Advaita is not the language of the soul – it is the language of the mind.

The function of the mind is to reflect in our intelligence the journey into the soul. But there is a point where, instead of reflecting and articulating truth, the mind begins imposing its own ideas on reality. This is the point where we lose our objectivity, our higher perspective and connection to the facts of existence. We begin to live in the world of the mind, in a world created from thoughts alone. Our soul is captured, imprisoned in the net of conceptual reality. She is no longer free, and in the claustrophobia of this mental cage, she begins to wither, dying away into sadness.

There is religion, philosophy, and spirituality. Out of these three, spirituality is the highest. When religion controls spirituality, it kills it. When philosophy controls spirituality, it kills it. Religion must step down if it has any respect for truth, while philosophy must learn to serve spirituality, otherwise it becomes its very enemy. Advaita is unique in the sense that it appeals to our responsibility to find a



direct insight into our original nature through the power of intelligence and understanding. However, somewhere along the way, due to its addiction to linear logic and idealism, it has become disconnected from truth. It has come to represent more how our mind works than to reflect reality. Advaita is an expression of extreme spiritual intellectualism which has chained our spirit and creative intelligence to non-dual dogma, blocking us from discovering the living truth of higher duality.

Falling into its own Trap: Further Flaws of Advaita

Even within its own limitations, is Advaita really logical? The fact is that there cannot be non-duality without duality, because to say ‘atman is brahman’ we need duality. Non-duality is only one aspect of reality and, the moment we make this one aspect absolute, it ceases to be truth at all – it becomes a lie. By denying the duality between the soul and her creator, not only is Advaita repudiating their relationship, it is also rejecting the relationship between the soul and her own subjectivity. And because that innermost and most fundamental relationship within our individual subjectivity is denied, the arising of true self-knowledge becomes impossible. Even though self-knowledge is meant to be its essence, Advaita is not a path of self-knowledge. It is a path of self-denial justified by identification with impersonal existence. People who abide upon the concept of non-duality, in a similar way as those who cling to the concept of no-self, not only do not know who they are, they have also entirely stopped looking.

Moreover, due to the fact that the inherent dynamics in the twofold relationship between the soul and herself and the soul and the beyond is negated in Advaita, the nature of the awakening process is not understood at all. We cannot understand our evolution if we do not know *who* is evolving. Advaita’s version of the concept of sudden awakening is flat and one-dimensional. The complexity of the path cannot be grasped, and the many stages inherent to awakening are not only not explained, they are even denied. This is the problem: If there is no duality how can there be ‘stages’ of awakening? How can there be enlightenment at all? By blindly following the simplistic logic of non-duality, Advaita fell into its own trap. The mind has replaced reality and hypocrisy has replaced freedom.

To deny our individuality is to deny the very thing that makes us human. Even on the path of transcendence, our humanity has to be embraced as the very vehicle of our transformation. Beautiful concepts of devotion and surrender have been distorted and corrupted by the virus of self-negation.



Surrender is not self-negation, it is a higher and exalted self-affirmation realized in the context of unity with the universal reality. We do not surrender to vanquish ourselves and vanish, but to enter our greater existence, our true life in the heart of the beloved of all souls, the supreme container of all life forms that is – love.

As a final point, Advaita is often associated with the fatalistic perception of reality and denial of free will found in Hinduism. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, it is said that one should give up the illusion of being a doer and identify with the ‘witness’. Why has such a perception of reality arisen? If we look into it more deeply, we can discern that it is a direct result of the absence of the concept of integration between our pure nature and its relative human expression. The concept of integration between the absolute and relative can be found in Zen (such as in the Five Ranks of Zen Tozan). But due to its complete negation of our relative identity, Advaita obviously lacks it. The result of this is the idealization of an entirely passive vision of our participation in life which is static, lethargic and non-imaginative. Of course there is no free will for those who are not in touch with their individuality and creativity. Free will and taking responsibility for the actualization of our destiny is an expression of the evolution of me and the awakening of intelligence.

Can Advaita be Saved?

While Advaita’s vision (vidya) of reality is incorrect, we should not fully refute it as ignorance (avidya) because it does contain many important revelations. Instead, we need to look carefully into the basket of Advaita and separate the good apples from the bad. It is difficult to repair the whole edifice if its foundations are flawed, but within the limitations of Advaita, an attempt can be made to rectify it. In this way, those who wish to walk the path of Advaita can endeavor to make sense of it. As Ramana once said: ‘Advaita is correct but only in theory, not in practice. If one followed Advaita to the letter, one could not engage in meditation work because this requires duality.’

The following statements qualify the philosophical assumptions of Advaita and, in doing so, put it into an acceptable conceptual framework:

1. Advaita is not a path but a final vision of reality. Therefore, after self-realization, the personal self is dissolved in brahman and there is only one self.



2. On the relative level, however, there is duality between the personal and the impersonal.² If this type of duality were non-existent, there wouldn't be a need for self-inquiry, studying the *Upanishads* or devotion to Shiva. In fact, even the event of enlightenment presupposes duality. If it is non-duality that needs to be realized, it presupposes one begins in the duality between ignorance and enlightenment. To refute the occurrence of enlightenment at all (as extreme adherents of Advaita do) goes entirely against basic common sense and is foolish. Duality is required even to refute the need for enlightenment.
3. Any sage who consciously follows the process of realizing non-duality should easily discover it is not black and white, and that there are many levels and stages inherent to self-realization. This indicates that between plain duality and pure non-duality there are intermediary steps, or twilight zones. The evolution into the complete realization of non-duality presumes the presence of a different, more refined, duality as the passage to complete non-duality.
4. After that which was dual is dissolved, and pure non-duality is realized, we are still caught in the paradox that there was once ‘someone’ who lived in ignorance. Even if we call this ignorance ‘unreal,’ that unreality cannot be entirely refuted, as it did exist at some point of time. Additionally, it still exists for those who are not yet liberated. As is expressed in the Buddhist Diamond Sutra, we need to reconcile the attainment of non-attainment. It may appear inexplicable but can be somewhat rationalized by the concept of a lower truth (which Advaita lacks).

When Advaita is seen as the absolute truth it is avidya in the sense that it is ignorant of the one who reaches non-duality. And if it ceased to be ignorant of this matter, it would not necessarily cease to be non-dual. It would, rather, transform its perception of reality into a more dynamic vision which could embrace both dual and non-dual aspects of existence.

Many seekers of truth are attached to Advaita because they associate it with Ramana Maharishi or Nisargadatta Maharaj. However, as we have said, these two masters did not teach Advaita Vedanta, but their own eclectic version of various Hindu teachings. Of course, they were both aware of Advaita,

² As in Nagarjuna's second negation



and they did at times use its ideas to justify their own philosophies. However, to say that they actually taught Advaita is a great over-simplification. They both cared more about the practical truth than the conceptual rationalization of the path. Since they attracted many intellectually oriented Indian and Western followers, they had to speak through the conditionings of these disciples to give some food to their minds, but this does not make them teachers of Advaita. Who are the real teachers of Advaita? With the exception of Adi Shankara, there really have not been Advaita teachers, only Advaita philosophers. No respectable teacher would teach Advaita, because it defies the fundamental principles of the inherently dual path to enlightenment.

Advaita may be valuable and beautiful, but more in the way the Egyptian pyramids have value – as relics of a golden era – rather than as something which can be applied directly to our immediate problems. The efforts of these deep thinkers, who wholeheartedly attempted to unravel the mystery of human enlightenment by using their linear mind to its very limits, can be deeply appreciated. But it is truth and not sentimentalism that we serve. Based on truth and compassion for those seekers who walk the path in deep pain and longing for freedom, we must conclude that Advaita is, in its current form, a reflection of ignorance. Those who surrender to Advaita without revising its fundamental assumptions, are either unintelligent, dishonest, or insincere. If they cannot embrace the essential duality between their own selves and universal reality, they should not enter the spiritual path in the first place – they are not ready.

Blessings,

Anadi

For a full glossary of terminology please visit our website www.anaditeaching.com/glossary

