

Advaita Vedanta

Advaita Vedanta is a school of Hindu philosophy and religious practice, and one of the classic Indian paths to spiritual realization. The term Advaita refers to its idea that the soul (true Self, Atman) is the same as the highest metaphysical Reality (Brahman). The followers of this school are known as Advaita Vedantins, or just Advaitins, and they seek spiritual liberation through acquiring vidyā (knowledge) of one's true identity as Atman, and the identity of Atman and Brahman.

Advaita Vedanta traces its roots in the oldest Upanishads. It relies on three textual sources called the Prasthanatrayi. It gives "a unifying interpretation of the whole body of Upanishads", the Brahma Sutras, and the Bhagavad Gita. Advaita Vedanta is the oldest extant sub-school of Vedanta, which is one of the six orthodox (āstika) Hindu philosophies (darśana). Though its roots trace back to the 1st millennium BCE, the most prominent exponent of the Advaita Vedanta is considered by the tradition to be 8th century scholar Adi Shankara.

Advaita Vedanta emphasizes Jivanmukti, the idea that moksha (freedom, liberation) is achievable in this life in contrast to Indian philosophies that emphasize Videhamukti, or moksha after death. The school uses concepts such as Brahman, Atman, Maya, Avidya, meditation and others that are found in major Indian religious traditions, but interprets them in its own way for its theories of moksha. Advaita Vedanta is one of the most studied and most influential schools of classical Indian thought. Many scholars describe it as a form of monism, others describe the Advaita philosophy as non-dualistic.

Advaita influenced and was influenced by various traditions and texts of Hindu philosophies such as Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, other sub-schools of Vedanta, Vaishnavism, Shaivism, the Puranas, the Agamas, other sub-schools of Vedanta, as well as social movements such as the Bhakti movement. Beyond Hinduism, Advaita Vedanta interacted and developed with the other traditions of India such as Jainism and Buddhism. Advaita Vedanta texts espouse a spectrum of views from idealism, including illusionism, to realist or nearly realist positions expressed in the early works of Shankara. In modern times, its views appear in various Neo-Vedanta movements. It has been termed as the paradigmatic example of Hindu spirituality.

A. Darśana (philosophy)

Advaita is a subschool of Vedanta, the latter being one of the six classical Hindu darśanas. It, like nearly all these philosophies, has an integrated body of textual interpretations and religious practices for what Hinduism considers four proper aims of life: virtue (dharma), material prosperity (artha), desire (kama) and the fourth and final aim being moksha, the spiritual liberation or release from cycles of rebirth (samsara). Traditional Advaita Vedanta centers on the study of the sruti especially the Principal Upanishads, along with the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita.

Within the Vedanta tradition of Hinduism are many sub-schools, of which Advaita is one. Unlike Buddhism, but like Jainism, all Vedanta schools consider the existence of Atman (real self, soul) as self

evident. The Vedanta tradition also posits the concept of Brahman as the eternal, unchanging metaphysical reality. The sub-schools of Vedanta disagree on the relation between Atman and Brahman. The Advaita darsana considers them to be identical.

Advaita Vedanta believes that the knowledge of one's true self or Atman is liberating. Along with self-knowledge, it teaches that moksha can be achieved by the correct understanding of one's true identity as Ātman, the dispassionate and unmoveable observer, and the identity of Ātman and Brahman. Correct knowledge, which destroys avidya, psychological and perceptual errors related to Atman and Brahman, is obtained through three stages of practice, sravana (hearing), manana (thinking) and nididhyasana (meditation).

The Vedanta tradition of Hinduism rejects the dualism of Samkhya. The Samkhya school of Hindu thought proposes two metaphysical realities, namely Purusha (spirit) and Prakriti (inert primal matter), then states that Purusha is the efficient cause of all existence while Prakriti is its material cause. Advaita, like all Vedanta schools, states that Brahman is both the efficient and the material cause, "that from which the origination, subsistence, and dissolution of this universe proceed." What created all existence is also present in and reflected in all beings and inert matter, the creative principle was and is everywhere, always. This Brahman it postulates is sat-cit-ananda (truth-consciousness-bliss). By accepting this postulation, various theoretical difficulties arise which Advaita and other Vedanta traditions offer different answers for: first, how did sat Brahman without any distinction become manifold universe? second, how did cit Brahman create material world? third, if ananda Brahman is pure bliss, why did the empirical world of sufferings arise? These are the questions that Advaita Vedanta thinkers have historically attempted to answer, as did the non-Advaita schools of Hinduism.

Advaita establishes its truths, in part, from the oldest Principal Upanishads (sruti), the Brahma Sutras, the Bhagavad Gita and numerous other Hindu texts. Reason is used to support revelation, the sruti, the ultimate source of truth. Reason clarifies the truth and removes objections, according to the Advaita school, however it believes that pure logic cannot lead to philosophical truths and only experience and meditative insights do. The Sruti, it believes is a collection of experience and meditative insights about liberating knowledge. The Advaita literature also provide a criticism of opposing systems, including the dualistic school of Hinduism, as well as non-Hindu philosophies such as Buddhism.

B. Ideas and Aims

B1. Atman

Ātman is a central idea in Hindu philosophy and a foundational premise of Advaita Vedanta. It is a Sanskrit word that means "real self" of the individual, "essence" and soul.

Ātman is the first principle in Advaita Vedanta, along with its concept of Brahman, with Atman being the perceptible personal particular and Brahman the inferred unlimited universal, both synonymous and interchangeable. It is, to an Advaitin, the unchanging, enduring, eternal absolute. It is the "true self" of an individual, a consciousness, states Sthaneshwar Timalina, that is "self-revealed, self-evident and self-aware (svaprakashata)". Atman, states Eliot Deutsch, is the "pure, undifferentiated, supreme power of

awareness", it is more than thought, it is a state of being, that which is conscious and transcends subject-object divisions and momentariness.

Advaita Vedanta philosophy considers Atman as self-existent awareness, limitless and non-dual. It asserts that there is "spirit, soul, self" (Atman) within each living entity, which are same as each other and identical to the universal eternal Brahman. It is an experience of "oneness" which unifies all beings, in which there is the divine in every being, in which all existence is a single Reality, and in which there is no "divine" distinct from the individual Atman.

Atman is not the constantly changing body, not the desires, not the emotions, not the ego, nor the dualistic mind in Advaita Vedanta. It is the introspective, inwardly self-conscious "on-looker" (saksi). To Advaitins, human beings, in a state of unawareness and ignorance, see their "I-ness" as different than the being in others, then act out of impulse, fears, cravings, malice, division, confusion, anxiety, passions, and a sense of distinctiveness.

B2. Brahman

According to Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is the highest Reality, That which is unborn and unchanging, and "not sublatale", and cannot be superseded by a still higher reality. Other than Brahman, everything else, including the universe, material objects and individuals, are ever-changing and therefore maya. Brahman is Paramarthika Satyam, "Absolute Truth", and the true Self, pure consciousness ... the only Reality (sat), since It is untinged by difference, the mark of ignorance, and since It is the one thing that is not sublatale".

In Advaita, Brahman is the substrate and cause of all changes. Brahman is considered to be the material cause and the efficient cause of all that exists. Brahman is the "primordial reality that creates, maintains and withdraws within it the universe." It is the "creative principle which lies realized in the whole world".

Advaita's Upanishadic roots state Brahman's qualities to be Sat-cit-ānanda (being-consciousness-bliss) It means "true being-consciousness-bliss," or "Eternal Bliss Consciousness" Adi Shankara held that satcitananda is identical with Brahman and Atman. The Advaitin scholar Madhusudana Sarasvati explained Brahman as the Reality that is simultaneously an absence of falsity (sat), absence of ignorance, and absence of sorrow/self-limitation (ananda). According to Adi Shankara, the knowledge of Brahman that Shruti provides cannot be obtained in any other means besides self inquiry.

B3. Puruṣārtha - the four goals of human life

Advaita, like other schools, accepts Puruṣārtha - the four goals of human life as natural and proper:

1. Dharma: the right way to life, the "duties and obligations of the individual toward himself and the society as well as those of the society toward the individual";
2. Artha: the means to support and sustain one's life;
3. Kāma: pleasure and enjoyment;
4. Mokṣa: liberation, release.

Of these, much of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy focuses on the last, gaining liberation in one's current life. The first three are discussed and encouraged by Advaitins, but usually in the context of knowing Brahman and Self-realization.

B4. Moksha - liberation

The soteriological goal, in Advaita, is to gain self-knowledge and complete understanding of the identity of Atman and Brahman. Correct knowledge of Atman and Brahman leads dissolution of all dualistic tendencies and to liberation, Moksha is attained by realizing one's true identity as Ātman, and the identity of Atman and Brahman, the complete understanding of one's real nature as Brahman in this life. This is stated by Shankara as follows:

"I am other than name, form and action.
My nature is ever free!
I am Self, the supreme unconditioned Brahman.
I am pure Awareness, always non-dual."
– Adi Shankara, Upadesasahasri

According to Advaita Vedanta, liberation can be achieved while living, and is called Jivanmukti. The Atman-knowledge, that is the knowledge of true Self and its relationship to Brahman is central to this liberation in Advaita thought. Atman-knowledge, to Advaitins, is that state of full awareness, liberation and freedom which overcomes dualities at all levels, realizing the divine within oneself, the divine in others and all beings, the non-dual Oneness, that Brahman is in everything, and everything is Brahman.

According to Rambachan, in Advaita, this state of liberating self-knowledge includes and leads to the understanding that "the self is the self of all, the knower of self sees the self in all beings and all beings in the self."

B5. Jivanmukta

In Advaita Vedanta, the interest is not in liberation in after life, but in one's current life. This school holds that liberation can be achieved while living, and a person who achieves this is called a Jivanmukta.

The concept of Jivanmukti of Advaita Vedanta contrasts with Videhamukti (moksha from samsara after death) in theistic sub-schools of Vedanta. Jivanmukti is a state that transforms the nature, attributes and behaviors of an individual, after which the liberated individual shows attributes such as:

- he is not bothered by disrespect and endures cruel words, treats others with respect regardless of how others treat him;
- when confronted by an angry person he does not return anger, instead replies with soft and kind words;
- even if tortured, he speaks and trusts the truth;
- he does not crave for blessings or expect praise from others;
- he never injures or harms any life or being (ahimsa), he is intent in the welfare of all beings;
- he is as comfortable being alone as in the presence of others;
- he is as comfortable with a bowl, at the foot of a tree in tattered robe without help, as when he is in a mithuna (union of mendicants), grama (village) and nagara (city);
- he doesn't care about or wear sikha (tuft of hair on the back of head for religious reasons), nor the holy thread across his body. To him, knowledge is sikha, knowledge is the holy thread, knowledge alone is supreme. Outer appearances and rituals do not matter to him, only knowledge matters;
- for him there is no invocation nor dismissal of deities, no mantra nor non-mantra, no prostrations nor worship of gods, goddess or ancestors, nothing other than knowledge of Self;
- he is humble, high spirited, of clear and steady mind, straightforward, compassionate, patient, indifferent, courageous, speaks firmly and with sweet words.

B6. Vidya, Svādhyāya and Anubhava

Sruti (scriptures), proper reasoning and meditation are the main sources of knowledge (vidya) for the Advaita Vedanta tradition. It teaches that correct knowledge of Atman and Brahman is achievable by svādhyāya, study of the self and of the Vedic texts, and three stages of practice: sravana (perception, hearing), manana (thinking) and nididhyasana (meditation), a three-step methodology that is rooted in the teachings of chapter 4 of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.

Sravana literally means hearing, and broadly refers to perception and observations typically aided by a counsellor or teacher (guru), wherein the Advaitin listens and discusses the ideas, concepts, questions and answers. Manana refers to thinking on these discussions and contemplating over the various ideas based on svadhyaya and sravana. Nididhyāsana refers to meditation, realization and consequent conviction of the truths, non-duality and a state where there is a fusion of thought and action, knowing and being. Bilimoria states that these three stages of Advaita practice can be viewed as sadhana practice that unifies Yoga and Karma ideas, and was most likely derived from these older traditions.

Adi Shankara uses anubhava interchangeably with pratipatta, "understanding". Dalal and others state that anubhava does not center around some sort of "mystical experience," but around the correct knowledge of Brahman. Nikhalananda states that (knowledge of) Atman and Brahman can only be reached by buddhi, "reason," stating that mysticism is a kind of intuitive knowledge, while buddhi is the highest means of attaining knowledge.

C. Stages and practices

Advaita Vedanta entails more than self-inquiry or bare insight into one's real nature, but also includes self-restraint, textual studies and ethical perfection. It is described in classical Advaita books like Shankara's Upadesasahasri and the Vivekachudamani, which is also attributed to Shankara.

C1. Jnana Yoga – path of practice

Classical Advaita Vedanta emphasises the path of Jnana Yoga, a progression of study and training to attain moksha. It consists of fourfold qualities, or behavioral qualifications (Samanyasa, Sampattis, sādhana-catustaya):

- Nityānitya vastu viveka - The ability (viveka) to correctly discriminate between the real and eternal (nitya) and the substance that is apparently real, aging, changing and transitory (anitya).
- Ihāmutrārtha phala bhoga virāga — The renunciation (virāga) of petty desires that distract the mind (artha phala bhoga), willing to give up everything that is an obstacle to the pursuit of truth and self-knowledge.
- Śamādi ṣatka sampatti — the sixfold virtues or qualities,
- Śama (mental tranquility, ability to focus the mind).
- Dama (self-restraint, the virtue of temperance).
- Uparati (dispassion, ability to be quiet and disassociated from everything; "discontinuation of religious ceremonies")
- Titikṣa (endurance, perseverance, ability to be patient during demanding circumstances).
- Śraddhā (the faith in teacher and Sruti texts).
- Samādhāna (attention, intentness of mind).
- Mumukṣutva - A positive longing for freedom and wisdom, driven to the quest of knowledge and understanding.

Correct knowledge, which destroys avidya, psychological and perceptual errors related to Atman and Brahman, is obtained in jnanayoga through three stages of practice, sravana (hearing), manana (thinking) and nididhyasana (meditation). This three-step methodology is rooted in the teachings of chapter 4 of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:

- Sravana, listening to the teachings of the sages on the Upanishads and Advaita Vedanta, studying the Vedantic texts, such as the Brahma Sutras, and discussions with the guru (teacher, counsellor);
- Manana, refers to thinking on these discussions and contemplating over the various ideas based on svadhyaya and sravana. It is the stage of reflection on the teachings;

- Nididhyāsana, the stage of meditation and introspection. This stage of practice aims at realization and consequent conviction of the truths, non-duality and a state where there is a fusion of thought and action, knowing and being.

C2. Samadhi

While Shankara emphasized sravana ("hearing"), manana ("reflection") and nididhyasana ("repeated meditation"), later texts like the Dṛg-Dṛśya-Viveka (14th century) and Vedantasara (of Sadananda) (15th century) added samadhi as a means to liberation, a theme that was also emphasized by Swami Vivekananda.

C3. Guru

Advaita Vedanta school has traditionally had a high reverence for Guru (teacher), and recommends that a competent Guru be sought in one's pursuit of spirituality. However, the Guru is not mandatory in Advaita school, states Clooney, but reading of Vedic literature and followed by reflection is. Adi Shankara, states Comans, regularly employed compound words "such as Sastracaryopadesa (instruction by way of the scriptures and the teacher) and Vedantacaryopadesa (instruction by way of the Upanishads and the teacher) to emphasize the importance of Guru". This reflects the Advaita tradition which holds a competent teacher as important and essential to gaining correct knowledge, freeing oneself from false knowledge, and to self-realization.

A guru is someone more than a teacher, traditionally a reverential figure to the student, with the guru serving as a "counselor, who helps mold values, shares experiential knowledge as much as literal knowledge, an exemplar in life, an inspirational source and who helps in the spiritual evolution of a student. The guru, , is more than someone who teaches specific type of knowledge, and includes in its scope someone who is also a "counselor, a sort of parent of mind and soul, who helps mold values and experiential knowledge as much as specific knowledge, an exemplar in life, an inspirational source and who reveals the meaning of life."