

## ***Schools of Vedanta Philosophy***

The Vedas are the religious scriptures of Hinduism. They are without doubt the oldest religious scriptures extant today in the world. All schools of Hindu philosophy are based on the Vedas. There are six schools of Hindu philosophy: Nyaya, Vaishesika, Samkhya, Yoga, Purva Mimamsa and lastly, Vedanta.

Among these, the Vedanta school is based on the Vedanta part of the Vedas, the Upanishads. The other schools are based on different parts of the Vedas other than the Upanishads.

The Vedantas or the Upanishads are so called because they are found at the end of the Vedas (anta meaning end). The other five schools of Hinduism are not well accepted today and it is the Vedanta school which has come to define Hinduism.

The Vedantas or the Upanishads define two main realities – Brahman, the Absolute reality, and the world, the relative reality. The world encompasses both the matter of the world, the non-living objects, and the souls, or consciousness.

Based on the definition of the relation between these two, five different schools of Vedanta philosophy are now known today. These five schools are:

- Dvaita: the dualistic school, main exponent is Madhava.
- Bheda Abheda or Dvaita Advaita: the founder is Nimbarka.
- Vishista Advaita: the founder is Ramanuja
- Shudh Advaita: the founder is Vallabha.
- Kevala Advaita: the founder is Sankaracharya. Kevala Advaita is usually referred to simply as Advaita, and it is this school that is meant when people say 'Advaita'.

Bheda Abheda and Shudh Advaita are considered to be variations of the Vishista Advaita school of Ramanuja and these are taken as part of Vishista Advaita.

The five schools are like different stages on the philosophical path depending on the way they define the relation between Brahman and the world and the amount of reality they grant to the world.

The dualistic school is the first stage, in which the world and Brahman are said to be two entirely different entities, and both are equally real.

The qualified monism school is the middle stage, when the world and Brahman are both real but are not different entities, and bear the relation of part and whole, thus being both different and non-different.

The Advaita or non-dual school is the final stage, when the reality of the world is denied and Brahman is declared to be the only reality.

Bheda Abheda falls between dualism (Dvaita) and qualified monism (Vishista Advaita), since it emphasizes the difference in qualified monism more than the non-difference and thus tends towards dualism.

Shudh Advaita falls between qualified monism (Vishista Advaita) and non-duality (Advaita), since it emphasizes the non-difference in qualified monism, and thus tends towards Non-dualism.



### 1.Dvaita (dualism):

The most famous exponent of this school is Madhava. In this school, Brahman and the world are considered to be two equally real entities and not related in any way. Brahman here is a purely personal God, a God with the typical omniscient powers that is considered Godly reminiscent of the Gods of dualistic religions like Christianity and Islam. The god of dualism is the Hindu God, Vishnu. Vishnu has created the world, and the world stands separate from God and in an inferior position to God with no link between the two. Vishnu controls the world and all world events, and the duty of all persons is to worship and pray to God. The Dualistic philosophy is a simple philosophy, easy to understand and relate to. It appeals directly to the heart, in the desire of all persons to have a God to worship and surrender oneself to.

### 2.Vishista Advaita (qualified monism):

The most famous exponent of Vishista Advaita is Ramanuja.

In Vishista Advaita, the world and Brahman are also considered two equally real entities, as in dualism, but here the world is not separate from Brahman but is formed out of Brahman.

Here also as in dualism, Brahman is a personal God with omniscient qualities. He has created the world, but He has created the world out of His own self. Thus the world bears to Brahman the relation of part to whole, or the relation of a 'qualified effect' to the base (hence qualified monism). The famous analogy given for this is the sea and wave – Brahman is the sea and the objects of the world, both non-living and the living souls, are like waves upon this sea. All waves are ultimately the sea only, but as long as we see the wave we think it to be different from the sea. The wave is of name and form only. Other analogies given for this are gold and gold jewellery, clay and clay pots, the spider and his web, etc.

Brahman as defined by Ramanuja is an entirely personal God. Ramanuja followed the path of Vaishnavism, and considered Brahman to be Vishnu or one of His Avatars. Vishnu has all the qualities of a personal God like Omniscience, Omnipotence, etc. Vishnu creates the world out of His love for humans, and controls the world at every step. The duty of humans is to love and worship the Lord Vishnu so that he will grant deliverance when our worship has ripened.

The practice of religion in Vishista Advaita is similar to Dualism, and the only difference is that mankind enjoys a higher status than in pure dualistic worship and is nearer to God.

Thus in Vishista Advaita, although both the world and Brahman are considered equally real, they are not considered two separate entities as in Dualism.

### 3.Kevala Advaita:

The teacher of Kevala Advaita is Sankaracharya.

Kevala Advaita or simply Advaita as it is known is the school of monism of Vedanta philosophy. This is the highest intellectual reading of spirituality.

In Advaita, the reality of the world is denied. Brahman is the only reality. The world although it subsists on Brahman has no intrinsic reality of its own and it is only Brahman at its base which gives it its reality.

The analogy given for Advaita is the famous analogy of the snake and the rope. In the dark, we may mistake a rope for a snake and for a time take it to be a real snake. But soon we realize that it is in fact a rope only. Once we know it to be a rope, we do not see the snake anymore. The rope had never existed, it was purely in our minds. So also, although it is only the Brahman which exists all around us, we see the world which is only a reading

of Brahman by our minds. But once we attain realization and see that it was Brahman all along, we do not see the world anymore.

The Brahman of Advaita is a purely impersonal entity. There can be no talk of creation or of love with regard to Brahman. Brahman exists of its own accord and does not in any way affect the world, the world evolves out of its own cycle of Nivritti(expansion) and Pravritti (involution). Practice of religion in Advaita is an intellectual practice. That is why Advaita was often seen as a religion of the mind rather than the heart. Yet for those who demand uncompromising reason in their search for the Truth, the path of Advaita is the supreme spiritual path.

#### 4. Bhedabheda (Bheda Abheda)

The greatest exponent of Bhedabheda is Nimbarka.

Bheda Abheda school (difference—non—difference) is also called Dvaita Advaita (dualistic Advaita). Bheda Abheda is an interpretation of Vishista Advaita and therefore it is often not considered separately but as a part of Vishista Advaita.

Like Vishista Advaita, Bheda Abheda school also believes that the world and Brahman are both equally real, and that the world is a part of Brahman. The difference is in emphasis, it emphasizes the difference in Vishista Advaita more and hence tends towards dualism. That is why it is also called Dvaita Advaita or Dualistic Monism.

The same analogy of sea and wave, clay and pot, etc. is used here. A particular analogy of Bhedabheda is the sun and the sun beam. The sun beam cannot be called separate from the sun, it arises from the sun and is attached to it. Yet it is not the sun either, it is only a part of the sun, a reflection of the sun, and it gives only a part view of the sun. Hence the world also is but a manifestation of Brahman, but it is a very puny manifestation and the difference with Brahman is very large.

Bhedabheda follows a dualistic pattern of worship. God here is Lord Vishnu, and He is described in dualistic terms, as the Lord of all and in whom we must seek refuge.

One aspect of Bhedabheda is Achintya Bhedabheda of Chaitanya Mahapurush. Chaitanya was a Bhakti saint of Bengal in the thirteenth century who started a powerful Bhakti movement centered around the philosophy of Bhedabheda. Here also he emphasized the difference between mortal humans and the Omniscient God, although he maintained that God and humans had a part-whole relationship. This difference—non—difference was said to be Achintya or indescribable.

Here it is important to stress the difference between the terms, 'Achintya' (unthinkable or unknowable) used in Bhedabheda and 'Anirvacaniya' (indescribable) used in Advaita.

Confusion has sometimes been caused by these terms as to the resemblance between Bhedabheda and Advaita. The two terms have approximately the same connotation, but they are used for two entirely different aspects.

Anirvacaniya in Advaita is used in a much more basic aspect, it relates to the ontological or metaphysical existence of the world, whereas Achintya in bhedabheda is used for a secondary aspect, the relation of the world and Brahman.

In Advaita, the existence of the world itself is challenged. In Bhedabheda, the existence of the world is accepted as real. Thus there is no ontological or metaphysical problem of existence of the world in Bhedabheda, it is accepted as existing primarily and it is only the secondary relation with Brahman that is considered somewhat mysterious.

Anirvacaniya in Advaita is used to describe the state of existence of the world itself, its ontological or metaphysical *existence*. The world is said to have only relative reality. But what exactly it means to say that the world exists in this state of relative reality, what state exactly the world is in when it is existing in this state of relative reality is said to be indescribable, or Anirvacaniya.

In Bhedabheda, the primary existence of the world is accepted to be real and there is no difficulty about this. But the relation of the world with Brahman is said to be Achintya or unthinkable, so the reference here is to a secondary or more external aspect of the world. In all versions of Vishista Advaita in fact, this may be said to be true in that having described both as equally real, the relation of the world with Brahman cannot be exactly described. Chaitanya emphasized this aspect to accentuate the Supremeness of God as someone whom we cannot understand, otherwise describing humans as nondifferent in Bhedabheda may give rise to the idea that God is within touching distance (as in the Vishistadvaita of Ramanua).

In Advaita, the question of the relation between the world and Brahman does not arise as the existence of the world itself is denied, and hence the secondary question does not arise.

### 5.Shudhadvaita:

The primary exponent of Shudhadvaita is Vallabhacharya. Shudhadvaita means pure monism (pure=shudh).

In Shudhadvaita, as in Vishista Advaita, the world is taken to have a real existence, as also Brahman. But it is said that there is no change of Brahman into the world, the world exists as it were as an aspect of Brahman without undergoing any change, it is a part of Brahman. We may consider it like two sides of a coin, with Brahman as one side and the world as another side. There is no change, the world is a part of the coin that is Brahman.

Hence this is called 'Shudh Advaita' because it is said that there is only one and there is no change. Vallabha declares that it is a purer form of Monism than even the Advaita of Sankaracharya, because there Brahman is said to manifest the relatively real world through its power of Maya but here even Maya is denied and there is no change.

However, we see that though Shudhadvaita calls itself monism, it recognizes the presence of both, the world and Brahman, as being equally real. Hence there are two realities. Hence, even if we say that it is a part of Brahman, the world does exist as a different reality from Brahman, the other side of the coin as it were. So it is actually a branch of Vishista Advaita, in that it recognizes both the world and Brahman as being two equally real existences, though it emphasizes the non-difference more by saying that the world is an inseparable, unchanged aspect of Brahman. Thus it tends more towards pure Advaita than the Vishista Advaita of Ramanuja.

All these philosophies differ in the way they define the relation of the world and Brahman. The world here means two aspects, the material non-living world and our souls or individual consciousness.

The relation of the non-living world to Brahman is interesting as philosophical speculation, but it is the relation of the souls which is most important to us because it is this that causes a difference in our practice.

In Dualism, our soul, that is, our consciousness, is something which is eternally and absolutely separate from Brahman. In Qualified Monism, our consciousness exists as separate from Brahman but it has Brahman at its root, and so we are nearer and within 'touching' distance of Brahman, we can experience ourselves as part of Brahman. In Advaita Vedanta, our consciousness is not real, it is a virtual shadow and we are actually Brahman, our consciousness is a delusion and once we can break out of this delusion we see that our true identity is Brahman itself.

Depending on this definition of the relation of our consciousness to Brahman, the different philosophies have their own goals and uses. None of these can be said to be higher or lower, they are different because they are suited for different temperaments.

The goal of religion is to lead us to the higher truth, defined as Brahman in the Vedantas. That which leads us to this goal in the fastest manner possible is the best religion. So depending on our temperament, the Dvaita may be the best philosophy or Advaita; that philosophy which works best for us is the supreme philosophy for us.

For those who wish to worship the Lord in the position of a servant and master, who wish to repose their full faith in God and give all responsibility to Him and live only as His *dasa*, the Dvaita is the best path.

For those who wish to feel nearer to him, 'taste' the Lord as a sugar candy, and wish to touch Him within their hearts, the path of Qualified Monism is the best.

But for those who seek the supreme Truth, who want to become one with the Truth itself, Advaita Vedanta is the highest path.

The path of Advaita Vedanta has always been accepted as the most intellectual path. Its logic is superior to the other paths. But this does not mean that it is the best path for religious experience. It is also universally accepted that the Dualistic path, the path of Bhakti, and Qualified Monism, are far more easier and lead us much faster to the goal of mystical Oneness with Brahman. Advaita Vedanta is a much more rigorous and hard path. For the present age of Kali Yuga in fact, the recommended path is that of Dvaita. But for those who seek to obtain their spiritual goals through the path of reason and logic, Advaita Vedanta will always stand out as the highest path.