

## **Advaita Darsanam: The Vision of Oneness**

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Advaita, as expounded systematically by Srimad Bhagavat Pada Sankaracharya (780-820 AD), is considered the epitome of the Vedic enterprise. Sankara, based on his deep reflection on the Upanishadic revelations and readings of the Buddhist, Sankhya, Yoga and Nyaya systems, and drawing significantly from his orthodox and ritualistic background, formulated his vision of oneness as a comprehensive system of thought and discipline of spiritual practice. His critique of rival systems is incisive and insightful. Sankara cleaned up and simplified orthodox ritualism and popular worship and presented them as means of attaining inner purity and psychic focus. He organized Hindus under four 'monasteries' and ten 'spiritual orders'. Sankara also renovated many Hindu temples, prescribed six deities for worship, and instituted the 'shodashopachara' and 'panchopachara' puja paddhati-s that majority of Hindus follow today. Sankara was a scholar, philosopher, yogi, commentator, debater, writer, poet, organizer, institution builder, trainer, leader and above all a spiritually enlightened master. Sankara is the central pillar of Hindu Dharma, as we know it today.

There has been a long unbroken succession of Advaita masters beginning from the Vedic times down to the 21st century - Yajnavalkya, Janaka, Ashtavakra, Uddalaka, Veda Vyasa, Gaudapada, Govindapada, Sankara, Padmapada, Vachaspati Misra, Madhusudana Sarasvati, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Shivananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Maharshi Aurobindo, Maharshi Ramana, Narayana Guru, Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Dayananda et.al.

It was Sankaracharya who determined the scriptural foundations of Advaita. Otherwise known as 'pramana granthas', they are three - the Upanishads (10 in number) the Bhagavad Gita (700 verses) and the Brahma Sutras (555 sutras). Together they constitute the 'prasthan trayi' - the ultimate source of Advaita spiritual wisdom. A correct interpretation of these texts requires linguistic, logical and contemplative skills.

Advaita radically differs from other vedantic traditions like 'Vishishtadvaita', Dvaita, Suddhadvaita, Dvaitadvaita and 'Sunya Advaita', and 'Samanvaya (eclectic) Advaita' - though all these traditions draw their insights from the same source books. Modern Hinduism is firmly anchored in the Advaita vision expounded by Sankaracharya - be it the path of bhakti, yoga, karma or jnana. All reforms - renaissance, spiritual and political movements, subsequent to the Islamic and European invasions, beginning with Guru Nanak, Kabir, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and Subramania Bharati, were inspired by the universal vision of Advaita. Advaita is the central principle around which the Hindu society coalesces and finds its purpose, meaning, sustenance and inspiration.

Dalit thinkers and reformers like Mahatma Phule, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and Dr. B.R Ambedkar sourced their vision for an egalitarian and just society to the Advaita philosophy. The bhakti movement of the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that became a bulwark against Islamic onslaught was a robust collective expression of Advaita experience.

The Advaita vision - its systematic teaching and practice and its applications in various domains of human activity, is the greatest contribution of Hinduism and India to humanity at large.

Advaita is a living tradition and its teaching and practice requires constant lived interactions, experimentations and interpretations. Only a living guru can fill such a dynamic role. A guru can be compared to a coach, mentor, guide, instructor, friend, facilitator, moderator, director, leader, competitor, challenger, role model and motivator - or all their functions rolled into one super figure. The scriptures define a guru as 'well trained' and 'deeply established'. Guru is wisdom incarnate - walks the talk. Guru lives in the midst of daily turmoil, interprets personal and collective experiences and constructs meaning for purposeful action. Krishna, Buddha, Vyasa, Sankara, Gandhi et.al. fall in this caliber of Gurus.

What is Advaita? Sankara succinctly puts it in this famous formulation: 'Brahma satyam, jagan mithya; jivo brahma eva naparah'- 'Brahman ( boundless consciousness) alone is true; the ever changing objective world is an appearance of that Brahman; the subjective embodied perceiver (of the world) is identical with Brahman.'

Great Upanishadic pronouncements (mahavakyas) like, 'tatvamasi', 'prajnanam Brahma', 'aham brahmasmi', 'ayam atma brahma', 'sarvam khalu idam brahma', 'satyam jnanam anantam brahma', 'vacarambanam vikaro namadheyam, mrittikatyeva satyam' etc. are guiding lights of Advaita vision, values and practice.

The 'Brahma Sutras' begins with the exhortation, 'thereafter, therefore, (let us) begin inquiry into brahman' and goes on to define (tatastha) brahman as 'the substratum from which the world emerges, in which it exists and into which it resolves'. Here, 'thereafter' points to seeker's qualification and 'therefore' to his/her intent. The Taittiriya Upanishad also defines (svarupa) brahman as 'truth, consciousness, eternal and bliss'. These words are not qualifying (viseshana), but only indicative (lakshana) definitions of brahman.

Advaita proposes that the ultimate goal of human life is 'moksha', (moha-kshayam), that is, ending of 'self-ignorance' and attainment of 'unlimited happiness'. Advaita also reveals that unlimited happiness is the nature of the 'self' (of the seeker of happiness). Limited happiness is pleasure (bhoga sukha) gained from indulgence in sense objects. Limitless happiness (yoga sukha) is realized in contemplative states guided by the identity statements (mahavakyas) of the Upanishads.

Advaita aims at a deeper cognitive shift from the 'me' (small i) to the 'we' (collective i-i-i-i...) to the Transcendental (big I) perspective. This shift happens while listening (sravana) intently to scriptural statements expounded by a living enlightened master. Perspectives are formed by past experiences organized and stored in the memory cells as sequences of words and images. These perspectives and interpretative tools can be changed and refashioned by apt words and imageries employed by an expert master craftsman established in Brahman.

Advaita contemplation is pivoted on the ontological givenness of Brahman. For this ‘a priori assumption’, the Advaita tradition takes inspiration from scriptural authority, logical analysis and life experiences. All the ten Upanishads in unison declare that Brahman is the ultimate invariable truth and that ‘the knower of Brahman is Brahman’. Upanishads reveal Brahman not as an objective reality, but as a deeply subjective experiential self. The embodied, subjective, invariable, self-experience of the agent, in the midst of the welter of objective variable experiences, is Brahman. Logically Brahman cannot be any or all of the ever changing objects of the world. At the same time change to occur and be experienced requires a changeless substratum. Thus the ever changing world of material objects and mental events imply Brahman as the substratum.

So too man’s search in this ever changing world for security, peace and happiness ends in utter futility. Man as a result becomes detached and reflective, reformulates questions and redirects the arrow of enquiry. Such is the fertile soil where the wisdom seeds of Advaita sprout. Thus, listening (sravana) to the statements of the Advaita scriptures removes the ignorance of Brahman, discriminating reflection (manana) removes doubts about Brahman and constant practice to abide (nididhyasana) liquidates unconscious habits that eclipse the vision of Brahman.

The main thrust of the Upanishads is to reveal the identity of Brahman with the experiencing self of the enquirer. The givenness (vastu-ta) or the existence of Brahman is a logical necessity and an ontological reality, and enjoys experiential proof (anubhava-avasana-tvat). The clinching proof of the ontological givenness of Brahman is the experience of enlightened masters and their ability to transfer this experience through systematic teaching and practices. ‘Brahma Vidya’ or self-knowledge is a self-transforming cognitive experience. As the knowledge dawns, the fearful, unhappy, insecure individual, encased in the body-I attitude, realizes himself/herself as the immortal, ever happy, all (bodies) accommodating consciousness. Like even the sun rise lifts the mist and reveals the splendor of the valley.

The living world’s pursuit for happiness is natural and not cultivated. When it comes to the human, this pursuit becomes more poignant and sophisticated. Man is a born seeker - philosopher. The Samskritam words for happiness are ‘sukham’ (all accommodating space) and ‘anandam’ (overflowing bliss). Both words, nudging each other, indicate happiness (sukham) as an all-inclusive transcendence, that is, Brahman. Meaning, happiness is realization of a dynamic, fluctuating state of constant inclusion and transcendence. This dynamic equilibrium (samadhi) state is called Brahman. The individual’s ceaseless search for security, knowledge and happiness culminates in his/her self-realization as Brahman.

The Upanishads present Brahman as the ultimate goal of human pursuit. Humanity’s collective historical experience is that we have been always seeking happiness. Therefore the scriptural Brahman cannot be other than the happiness unlimited that we all experientially seek. Hence the Upanishads themselves declare that Brahman is limitless happiness (ananta-anandam Brahma). And knower of Brahman is happy, nay happiness itself.

This analysis leads the enquirer to the next question: where is the locus of this Brahman, that is, limitless happiness. The Aitareya Upanishad declares: ‘prajna pratishta, prajnanam Brahma’. The knowing (experiencing) awareness is the locus of Brahman. The contemplative, detached observer, free from the wasteful enterprises of seeking happiness in the world of sense objects, while actively involved in interactive relationships, through an transformative awakening, by progressively abandoning identifications with objects, body,

senses, mind, intellect, memory, ego, knowledge, ignorance, pleasure and pain, comes to abide in the true self as the foundational, illuminating awareness of all objective experiences. The all illuminating awareness, as pure consciousness (cit) is self-luminous (svaprakasam). The locus of Brahman is the pivotal 'I' experience supporting all 'this' experiences. 'Know Brahman hidden in the cave of the heart', advises the Taittiriya Upanishad.

We find seven transformative movements in self-realization:

- (i) The discovery that limitless happiness (LH) is the ultimate value.
- (ii) LH is not the property of mental and material sense objects.
- (iii) LH to be limitless has to be self-existing and inclusive and hence neither a product to be created nor opposed to dualistic experiences.
- (iv) There is only one self-existing and inclusive being in the whole of experience and that is the self-luminous 'I' experience.
- (v) Self-luminosity is the nature of consciousness.
- (vi) The conscious enquirer - the experiencing, doubting and questioning 'I', who is self-conscious and conscious of others, is the only source of consciousness.
- (vii) Hence consciousness is limitless happiness and I am consciousness, happiness.

Advaita is not to be equated with philosophical monism, though they share some explanatory features. Monism, like Advaita, presents reality as one stuff that expresses in myriad forms. But in monistic thinking there is no mention of consciousness or bliss. The monistic stuff is drab, flat, dimensionless and homogeneous, while Advaita Brahman is colorful, rich, complex and heterogeneous. Monism is an intellectual construct whereas Advaita is an experiential structure. Intellectual constructs are linear, simple and neat, experiential structures are holistic, complex and fussy. Monism is exclusive, Advaita is inclusive. For Monists consciousness is a product and comes later, for Advaita consciousness is the source and primary. Advaita is engagement and bliss, monism is indifference and joyless.

Advaita promises embodied enlightenment, or living bliss (jivan mukti), means freedom for the embodied, en-worlded self, living, interacting, receiving, processing and responding to stimuli. In fact dynamic interaction is a necessary condition for exploring dimensions of selves and developing efficiencies and expressing potentialities. In that sense enlightenment is a continuous process, and not a onetime event. Enlightenment is pouring out of Brahman bliss in and through the altruistic choices that networked individuals make in their interactive enterprises.

For the enlightened, mental and material events do not cover but only reveal Brahman. The world and Brahman are related like ring and gold or waves and the ocean. Sankara termed this relationship as 'between satya' (real) and mithya/maya (apparent). The apparent is a category between real and unreal (sat-asat-bhyam-anirvacaniya-maya). Maya is contentless and is contained in Brahman.

Maya is to be equated with the Buddhist emptiness experience. Emptiness is the end point that intellect and intuition can reach. It is the contemplative, collective, long, unbroken experiences of a race ((scriptural wisdom) that can pierce the veil of maya and reveal the reality of Brahman. Hence the importance of transferring Brahmavidya, generation to generation, from an experienced guru to a qualified sishya. 'The world is a dancing stage of Shiva, unfolded by Shiva out of himself - in this world dance, Shiva is the dancer, Shiva is the spectator, and Shiva is the stage', exclaims an anonymous couplet.

In the Advaita vision, being is doing and doing is being (karmani akarma darsanam; akarmani karma ca). Brahman is ceaseless activity. (varta eva ca karmani). Metaphorically Brahman is comparable to the ocean (apuryamanam-acala pratishtam samudram). Ocean yields its water as vapor that becomes clouds, rains, rivulets, rivers that finally become ocean, to become clouds again. Maya is this incredible playfulness of Brahman.

‘Brahman desired’ (sokamayata), declares the Taittiriya Upanishad - a desire to express, explode, expand, explore, and experience. This Brahman project is not out of any inadequacy, but out of overflowing fullness. (purnat purnamudachyate). Brahman reveals and realizes through the competing and coalescing desires, thoughts and actions of networked individuals and groups, within the constraints of time, space and resources.

This world of mind and matter is not antithetical to Brahman, but its primary expression as field for more complex self-revelations. The more Brahman reveals the more it remain concealed. This process is not simple, monotonous, cyclical repetitions. Every revelation and every expression is new and wafts the fragrance of fresh blooms. In this self-expression Brahman breaks and makes rational and verbal categories and boundaries. It is a spectacle of speechless wonder.

The description is not the described. Advaita description is not Advaita experience. Therefore Advaita invites competing and conflicting modalities of descriptions to fine tune contemplative understanding and experience of Brahman. Interacting with Buddhist, agnostic, atheistic, materialistic, pluralistic, dualistic, experimental and experiential approaches with their competing truth claims and plethora of disciplinary protocols, Advaita fine tunes human understanding, relations and actions to facilitate the Brahman project. Advaita is the midwife that eases the manifold incarnations of Brahman.

A universally asked question about the Advaita vision is that, if the individual( jiva) is Brahman in the deepest sense of consciousness, why there is ignorance, doubt and suffering in the life of individuals. Can the solely and only existing Brahman suffer its own actions or the actions of the non-existing other? Is the individual a product of Brahman action or channel of Brahman action or Brahman action itself? According to Advaita, individual is indeed Brahman. Ignorance, doubt and suffering are stages of Brahman strategies to challenge and be challenged in a dialectical process of self-revelation. The Samskritam word for suffering is ‘dukha’ (constriction). Constriction is a device that provokes creative faculties and potentialities. While to the finite constriction is limiting, for the infinite (purna/ananta) constriction is unlimiting. .

In the Advaita vision, Brahman is not so much an end point as it is the beginning point. Brahman is not to be reached, purified, modified or produced. Brahman is not the object of knowledge, love or action, but the very subject that knows, loves and acts. (yat cakshusha na pasyati yena cakshumshi pasyati/ tadeva brahma tvam viddhi, nedam yadidamupasate). ‘Brahman is not seen by the eyes, but sees through the eyes’. Somehow a creepy notion has crept into the Vedanta circles that Brahman, the ultimate goal of human life, can be reached only after millions of life cycles of exclusive practices, and once reached the story ends there. Backward-to-Brahman practices not only entrench old habits and distort Brahman revelation, but also generate severe forms of delusionary neuroses and psychoses. Instead of enjoying self-expression such practices end up in self-delusion, suffering, greed and exploitation. Forward-with-Brahman proactive projects begin with the ontological

commitment (sraddha) drawn from the scriptural teaching about the identity of Brahman with jiva (jiva brahma aikyam).

Taking the attitude that ignorance, desire, action and attachment as structures to reflect and progressively realize Brahman, the individual integrates the world into his/her self-experience. Like a maestro musician integrates musical instrument to his/her self and expresses him/herself through the instrument as lilting mellifluous music. Again the musician as a novice used the same instrument to develop his/her skills in music. While ascending to self-discovery and descending to self-expression, the musician uses the same facility. Similarly, instead of fearing and shunning the world and looking for an elusive Brahman, in the caves of mountains, at the end of the rainbow, as Hindus have been pitifully doing for so long, (putting it metaphorically, tying the horse of Brahman behind the cart of daily living,) and in the process missing the joy of a happy ride and come to live a stagnant, retarded life, the Advaita clarion call is “Rise up, wake up, look in and out, think, act, interact, reveal and realize your innate Brahman.” (uttishthata, jagrata, nibhotata). Brahman is not to be reached, Brahman is to be revealed; Brahman is not to be attained, Brahman is to be expressed; Brahman is not at the end, brahman is at the very beginning. Brahman is not in the caves of mountains; Brahman is in the caves of our hearts. (yo veda nihitam guhayam).

The jivanmukta experiences Brahman in all interactions. His/her political, economic, social, artistic and cultural activities are expressions of the infinite bliss of Brahman. Yajnavalkya was a twice married householder; Janaka was a king; Vyadha was a meat seller; Ashtavakra was a hunchback mendicant; Pingala was a courtesan - but all of them were enlightened masters. Vyasa fathered children in his step sisters-in-law; Sankara was a lifelong celibate, and Buddha deserted his wife and infant son. All the three were great religious teachers and social organizers. Spiritual enlightenment and freedom is not from the world, but in the world. Brahman is in the manifested world, and at the same time beyond it. The jivanmukta lives happily in the world and not for happiness. The Bhagavad Gita uses the word ‘sthitaprajna’ to indicate the ‘happy-in-the-world-man’ in contrast to ‘for-happiness-in-the-world-man’.

There are four problematics that have been points of dogged arguments in the Advaita circles. These arguments help fine tune the experience of Brahman.

- (i) the locus of ignorance (avidya),
- (ii) the status of the world (loka),
- (iii) efficacy of knowledge (jnana), and,
- (iv) the importance of preceptor (guru).

In the hide and seek play of Brahman, intellect and ignorance play important roles. Ignorance is ignoring the subject (self) and focusing on the object (world). Sva-swami-saktyoh svarupopalabdi hetu sambandha’, that is, Brahman hiding (sambandha) in embrace with its manifestation inwardly explore deeply and reveal itself anew.

Intellect is the seat of ignorance. That position raises a red flag in the logician’s mind. How can intellect, a manifestation of Brahman, house ignorance that causes the manifestation in the first place. Therefore they argue that ignorance’s right location is Brahman itself. But the hitch is that Brahman cannot be ignorant - how can there be a dark patch in the sun, asks Advaita metaphorically. Ignorance is the extroverted, world focused mode of intellect and knowledge is contemplative, intuitive mode of intellect that realizes world as manifestation of Brahman. Hence ignorance is only an unreflective mode of intellect that is corrected by a

reflective mode, created by listening to Advaita scriptures, that reveals Brahman. The enquiry into ignorance liquidates ignorance, along with the very question and the ignorant questioner. The question dissolves without an answer. And Brahman reveals to the questioner as the blissful self. Some scholars take the position that Brahman being the substratum of intellect, that modifies as ignorance, has ignorance but is not ignorant following the logic that the 'possessor is not the possessed'. Ignorance means room for growth and self-expression.

The status of the world is another problematic in Advaita. Is the world real or unreal? If the world is real, it won't change and if unreal, it won't be experienced. One branch of the Buddhists and some Vedantins along with idealists like Bishop Berkeley argue that world is unreal and is just a construct of the mind. Perception is just a representation, an interpretation and not a presentation. Advaita doesn't hold this view that world is creation of the individual mind. The tree that I see out there is empirically present in the public space, for anyone with a healthy pair of eyes to see and relate. Hence the tree out there is not an individual's subjective, idiosyncratic creation, 'esse est percipi' (drishti srishti), but the presentation of an objectively existing tree (sristi drishti), interpreted by the mind for private consumption. If the world is unreal, its source Brahman also becomes unreal, which leads to nihilism, which is against the spirit of humanity and disgustingly tasteless (anishtam). In the Advaita structuring of reality Brahman (consciousness) is absolute (paramarthika), objective world is a web of relations (vyavaharika) and subjective interpretations are unique neurological events (pratibhasika). Metaphorically they can be compared to gold, ring and wedding ring. The value of wedding ring is imposed on ring and the value of ring is imposed on gold and in fact gold alone is true. The 'paramarthika' is the substratum of the vyavaharika, which in turn is the ground of 'pratibhasika'.

The bitterest arguments are reserved for self-knowledge and its efficacy. According to some Vedanta scholars, just self-knowledge is not enough. You have to sweat the small stuff, make strenuous effort to realize the object of knowledge. Just as knowledge of sugar doesn't sweeten your tea, knowledge of Brahman doesn't mean a bit unless the knower further makes effort to get Brahman. This argument is true in the case of rituals or in the acquisition of powers or objects where the subject identifies with one of the limbs of a tripartite relationship (karta-kriya-karma). In the tripartite state of awareness, there is ignorance of Brahman and the alienated Brahman becomes object of search, to be known, sought after and finally conquered and added to the self. The unconscious, uninformed search for Brahman becomes the fruitless exertions of rituals, sex, industry, politics, sports and entertainments. Brahman is mistaken for heaven, pleasure, money, power, glory and leisure. Those possessions have value in the context of Brahman, worthless devoid of self-awareness and Brahman knowledge.

Advaita presents Brahman as an accomplished (siddha) reality, non-separate (ananya) from the seeker, ignored but not lost. Hence, (i) knowledge of Brahman is immediate (aparoksha); and, (ii) knowing is being (brahma vid brahmaiva). 'Jnanaturdhvam na sadhana anantara apeksha' - 'no further effort after self-knowledge', asserts Sankara. Knowing the pen in the pocket is ending the search and gain of the pen. Self-knowledge breaks out of the stranglehold of tripartite linearity. Intellect becomes a silent witness as the knower consciousness, known consciousness and the knowing consciousness are realized as a seamless flow of pure blissful consciousness. The dichotomy of knowledge and praxis is operative only in the exclusive objective realm and not in the inclusive subjective realm.

Modern Vedantins are guru averse. They dislike submitting and exposing themselves. They are also suspicious of scriptures and intellectual disquisitions and linguistic exercises. They don't mind physical exercises like yoga, mountaineering and surfing. Modern intellectuals are tired of their intellect and go for unaided explorations for the so called intuition. Intuition is the new avatara of good old revelation and divine blessing. The ubiquitous example quoted for 'guruless enlightenment' is Ramana Maharshi. The entire spiritual literature of the world, time and again, insist on the importance of guru in self-realization, but to suit the convenience of moderners, one lone example is overemphasized, superseding all other testimonies. Such a stand-alone example cannot be accepted as a reliable standard. The danger of waiting for and depending on the manna of spiritual intuition is that any crazy neurotic or psychotic can come up with claims of self-realization. And there would be no standard test or verification. Self-realization becomes a cacophonous bazaar of spurious spiritual stuff and outrageous personal claims. No doubt self-realization is a unique flowering of the individual (svadharma), but it happens only in an interactive and intellectually challenging environment (lokasamgraha) and by an insightful abiding (vritti jnana) in Brahman. This requires a conjoined exercise of the intellect, emotions, body, neighborhood and nature, to untangle the mind and unleash the bliss and power of Brahman.

Guru is the living face of the collective wisdom of the entire race. The individual mind has to find its roots in collective wisdom to grow and flower. Epistemologically, it is the words of the guru that cause the neural change and the resultant cognitive shift. Solutions are always outside the problem. To exit a problem is to reorganize the problem. The guru and seeker in their dynamic relationship forms a spiritual duet, and through a process of mutual interrogation, guided by the scriptures, initiate relevant cognitive processes (a-khandakara vritti) that opens the heart (buddhi) to the revelation of Brahman. Without this interrogative process, what the protagonist seeker achieves will be the stale artifacts spewed out by a private, undernourished, delusory and megalomaniac mind. Enlightenment requires rigorous quality check.

One of the charges against Advaita is otherworldliness. Advocacy of values such as viveka (discrimination), vairagya (detachment), brahmacarya (celibacy), sannyasa (renunciation), ahimsa (non-violence) and the espousal of a qualityless, characterless, faceless, desireless and actionless Brahman has contributed to this popular notion about Advaita. The fact is that those terms are used to describe the indescribable profundity and affluence of Brahman.

Viveka means measure, judgment and aesthetic sensitivity. Vairagya is multi-perspective gaze. Brahmacarya is passionate, focused pursuit of excellence. Sannyasa is connectivity and inclusiveness. Ahimsa is co-existence with dissent and differences. Desirelessness is self-givingness. Actionless-ness is enjoying action and unfolding through choices. The Brahman of Advaita is space-like inclusive consciousness. Brahman is not opposed to, but appears as the world. Being Brahman is doing Brahman. My self-realization is entwined with other's self-realization. Values and practices are double edged - they can enhance as well as inhibit. With a Backward-to-Brahman mindset these values becomes inhibitive, but reinforced by Forward-with-Brahman attitude they become exhibitivite and facilitative. Only a 'Brahma Jnani' can effectively and joyfully function in this world, engaging in self-giving, altruistic, teamwork. They are risk takers, leaders and pathmakers. Advaita paves the way for real, sustainable, green enjoyment (tena tyaktena bhunjitha) and wellbeing of all (sarvodaya).

There are three areas that orthodoxy doesn't feel comfortable with Advaita. They are related to the belief in divine incarnation, image worship and karma and rebirth. Though all the four dharma traditions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, hold these beliefs in differently nuanced forms, the Advaita take on them is fundamentally different. The goal of all dharmic traditions is freedom from the cycle of birth and death, from the causative flow of karma and karma phala. The incarnations, gurus, bodhisattvas and arhats help seekers in this process. For the Buddhist the center of the karmic whirl is empty. For the Jain, the Sikh and most Hindus at the center it is a solid monad. For Advaita the karma swirl is like clouds in the sky or waves in the ocean. And the center is oceanic. Freedom in Advaita is not by the cessation of karma but by engaging in karma playfully. Rebirth is constant creation of self, the body-mind-memory-ego complex, in engagement with a dynamically changing phenomenal world. Advaita liberates the individual from identification with karma and karma phala. The jivanmukta plays with karma, becomes a master of gunas, combining and recombining these energies at will.

Advaita does advocate the idea of incarnation as emergency Brahman manifestation in time - space to replenish and revive the creation, to put the train of phenomena back on the rails, to restore the balance between antithetical forces. In fact Brahman incarnate as the creation and every individual phenomenon in it. Incarnation is also understood as timely help delivered to a helpless creature. Swami Vivekananda explains incarnation as the response of Brahman to the helpless cry of humanity for direction and solace. 'Incarnations are many' says Bhagavatam, taking the idea beyond the ten Vaishnava incarnations. A fresh idea, a new solution, a discovery, a bouquet of flowers in a cold, cloudy day, a word of comfort for the sick--all can be considered incarnations. Jesus was an incarnation, so was Judas, so was Peter, Mohammed, Moses, so too is the Sinai Mountain and the Burning bush.

Advaita advocates image worship as an effective mode of expanding awareness from the particular (visesha) to the general (avisesha) and to the subtle (linga) and then to the all-inclusive Transcendent (Brahman). Images are visual descriptions of Brahman. Shiva dancing is a circle of fire, Vishnu reclining on the serpent bed, Krishna playing on flute amidst gopis in Vrindavan, Durga astride a lion slaying the buffalo demon, Hanuman flying with the mountain peak, Ganesha riding the mouse, Jesus on the cross, the black stone of Kaaba - all are visual images describing the all-inclusive Brahman. Jesus on the cross is incarnate Brahman, and the resurrected Christ Transcendent Brahman. As the meditation deepens the interpretation changes and experience envelops larger spheres. The visvarupa of the Bhagavad Gita depicts the highest form of image worship. Experiencing everything as a connected network, seeing nothing redundant, respecting even a blade of grass, flowing with the ebb and tide of events, is 'visvarupa darsana'. This state of mind can be equated with the Buddhist sunyata and equanimity. Seeing all contradictions and paradoxes in one canvas is emptiness - Into that emptiness flows the bliss of Brahman.

Sankara cleans up the mess of Hindu altar by prescribing six deities (shanmata) for daily worship and contemplation. They are: Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, Kartikeya, Ganesha and Surya. The living tradition of Advaita would add Christian God, Jewish Yahweh and Islamic Allah into the pantheon of sacred deities. Jesus, Moses and Muhammad would be accepted as gurus on par with Vyasa, Sankara, Krishna and Rama. The seeker can choose to worship all of them or any one of them or any combination of them. Sankara himself had composed hymns of invocation and designed methods of worship for these deities. These Hindu deities are not just images. They are visual descriptions given by devotees who had spent years steeped in scriptures, engaged in discussions with scholars, rent loving service to the community,

traveled the length and breadth of the land, deepened their sensitivities in meditation and then crystallized and expressed their experiences in the most sublime language. Images are far superior to verbal descriptions and ritualistic worship is much deeper and integrative than precepts and preaching. A temple of worship is much more vivid than a book of knowledge. However in Advaita, the ultimate temple is the human body, the sanctum is the mind, the idol is the self and the ideal is Brahman.

Sankara's pluralism project, that is, Advaita, which has been successfully implemented in the Indian subcontinent, can now be taken to the world at large to integrate all traditions under one umbrella, which is the true meaning of religion and Dharma - deepening and binding together.

Has the Advaita vision of 'inclusive oneness' caused the downfall of Hinduism and India? Has Advaita outlived its value? Or is it that Advaita may be effective within dharmic traditions, but devoid of the intellectual and emotional tools, historically honed strategies, and community will, Advaita is pathetically impotent in dealing with exclusivist and aggressive, proselytising and predatory religious movements? Especially with Semitic traditions like Islam and Christianity whose marching slogan is 'faith, faith, more faith and unquestioned faith'. The total abandonment of reason (De-Hellenization of faith, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XIV put it) by the virulent followers and foot soldiers of these two religions have not only caused untold misery to humankind (crusades, thirty years' war, inquisitions, witch burnings, genocides, terrorism, veils, fatwas, forced conversions, colonization etc.) but also has shaken and fractured the world views and convictions of dharma communities and traditions. Hindu thinkers are increasingly calling into question the very morality of an asymmetrical engagement and the survival value of Advaita inclusiveness.

No doubt the world has moved away from the tooth and claw, (tooth for a tooth) law of the jungle. In the twenty first century, of a networked, connected and globalized planet of 7 billion people, the whole world has become one neighborhood and one family (vasudhaiva kutumbakam). Though the world has not gotten rid of their racial, religious, linguistic, ethnic, and class differences and disputes, the awareness of shared destiny and collective responsibility is slowly imbuing the text of human discourses. A strong feeling is emerging that the planet and its resources, human history and its accomplishments, (religious, cultural, scientific, and technological,) belong to all of humanity. That war, and its aftermath a nuclear Armageddon, is no option for settling disputes. That now is the time for a new religiosity, a new spirituality, a new philosophy, that captures the heartbeat of the age, that speaks the language of reconciliation, discussion, negotiation, win-win solutions and the rest of it.

If two thirds of the world is normative believers of different formal religions, one third are non-believers - atheists, agnostics, doubters, skeptics, secularists, communists, evolutionary biologists, cognitive scientists and other neutral people. Even among believers one third is indifferent to dogmas and rituals. There are a large number of people who shop for spirituality and choose to make their own cocktail of beliefs and practices. Orthodoxy's lock on the Koran, Bhagavad Gita, the Bible and other scriptures are loosening as bandwidth access to information is widening. Christianity has become a pitiable, old, toothless lion and Islam a fatally wounded tiger left with a faint growl. The dharmic traditions and Advaita are making slow but steady inroads into the hearths and habitats, boardrooms and drawing rooms and sanctuaries and study centers of the world. The inclusive transcendence of Advaita, a meta-space for competing world views and truth claims to cohabit, alone can make meaning out of this incredibly chaotic diversity and offer a nonviolent framework for conversations

and negotiations for positive sum solutions. Advaita is the only candidate for the religious stewardship of the world - to deepen in awareness and bind in love this tiny living planet, precariously poised on the edge of abyss.

Morality is the steadfastness of good in overcoming evil without getting infected by the easy dubious ways of the antagonist. A victory sacrificing principles (dharma) is worse than defeat and will be unsustainable (adharma). Advaita has sufficient spiritual depth, intellectual clarity, emotional purity, ethical objectivity, interpretive skills and strategic span to engage exclusivist and expansionist, selfish and virulent non verifiable truth claims like Christianity and Islam. Rationality and scientific thinking would be effective tools in this dialogue, appealing to the common issues facing humanity would be another, but the most effective would be patient silent work and exemplary living.

The asymmetry of an inclusive vision like Advaita interacting with an exclusive tradition like Christianity would look absurd, comical, and often suicidal. With one of the combatant's hand tied behind and the other free and fully armed.

Advaita position could be:

- (i) Exclusivists hold certain truth claims for the defence which they are willing to kill and be killed and for the realization of which they are ready to subject themselves to severe discipline and make personal sacrifices.
- (ii) Inclusivists hold certain other truth claims to defend which they are willing to sacrifice their lives and to validate which they are ready to engage in rational and non-violent arguments and follow a regime of personal disciplines.
- (iii) Inclusivists base their defence arguments on collective human wisdom (sruti), reason (yukti) and experience born of practice (anubhava).
- (iv) Whereas, exclusivists base their defence arguments purely on faith and one book.

These are the two basic orientations of the human psyche - exclusive and inclusive; in-group and out-group; us and they; I and thou; and faith and reason. And individuals and communities go through this pendulum swing, between faith and reason, often frighteningly schizophrenic, to find their equilibrium states. Both communities, faithfuls and rationalists, have produced extraordinary human beings - brave, compassionate, skillful and creative. To cite a few: Albert Schweitzer and Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell.

Humanism, an ethical system based on collective human experiences and secularism a political order based on human reason, both outcomes of the enlightenment project, aimed at the worldly good of human, along with pluralism or multiculturalism and environmentalism, come close to Advaita vision of oneness. They represent the modern interpretation of Dharma. Brahman manifests in time-space as Dharma. The modern Indian state should adopt this definition of Dharma rather than the outmoded Varnasrama classification of people and professions based on accident of birth. Competitive worth and not predetermined birth should be the criterion for organizing the society. Hinduism being a 'moksha sastra' should break out of the narrow geographical confines and spread wings to span the whole world. The new mantra should be: "Secularize the Indian state and globalize Hindu Dharma".

The monolithic Christianity and Islam will be cannibalized by decentralized smaller faith groups. Advaita visualizes a diffused power structure with decision making centers everywhere. As V.S Naipaul put it in the Indian context, a space 'for million mutinies'. A

postmodernist, post secular, post hegemonic world is the world of Advaita - a world where all are engaged in friendly rivalry. 'Tairiyam navirudhyate' - Advaita creatively engages with all truth claims and world narratives - declared Gaudapada, the grand guru of Sankara.

To conclude, Advaita doesn't consider exclusive truth claims an aberration or threat to human survival or a hindrance to individual flourish and wellbeing. The faith based claims represent the right side of the brain, and man's need for certainty and freedom from anxiety. Reason based claims represent the left side of the brain and man's ability to think logically, see both sides of the coin, doubt a proposition, and last but not the least, his need for self-possession and freedom from dogma .

Between these two poles hangs human destiny.  
And the future of India and Hinduism could not be any different.

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