

The Sanatana Dharma: The Vedas, Upanishads and Vedanta

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What is that by being known, everything is known?
-Mundaka Upanishad

The *Upanishads* and their commentaries are the conclusion of the ancient *Vedas* and form the basis of *Vedanta* (*Veda Anta*, the pinnacle of the *Vedas*) religion and philosophy. This Vedic Tradition represents the immense contribution of the subtle Indian mind to the great Primordial Wisdom Tradition of humankind. This Primordial Awareness Wisdom teaching first arose in the ancient *Vedas* (from 1500 BCE). It is present at the highest nondual levels of our major traditions—Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Greek and Egyptian mystery religions.

The canonical *corpus* of *Vedanta* is comprised of the three *Prasthanas* or the *Prasthanatrava*, the “threefold source” of *Vedanta*: the *Upanishads*, the *Vedanta Sutra* (*Brahma Sutra*) and the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is the sixth book of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. The conclusion of the ancient *Vedas* is revealed in the esoteric teaching of the *Upanishads* (600-400 BCE). The *Vedanta Sutra* (300 BCE) contains 555 sutras which explicate the *Upanishads*. Authorship of this vital text is attributed to Vyasa-Badarayana, the great Indian sage and compiler of the *Vedas*. The three primary commentators on these terse and difficult *sutras* developed the three schools or views of *Vedanta*. They are *Advaita Vedanta* (nondual *Vedanta*) whose primary commentator is Shankara (788-820); *Vishishtadvaita Vedanta* (qualified nondual *Vedanta*, Ramanuja, 11th century); and *Dvaita Vedanta* (dualistic *Vedanta*, Madhva, 1197-1276).

The *Upanishads* are the final and ultimate revealed scriptures (*shruti*) of the *Vedas*. All Hindu religions accept the authority of the *Vedas*. Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism do not. The primordial teaching of the *Vedas* appears in four collections or parts, each part evolving various schools (*shakha*): The *Rigveda* (poetry); the *Samaveda* (song); the *Yajurveda* (sacrificial rites) and *Atharvaveda* (the *Veda* of the great *rishi* Atharvan). The numinous *Vedic* teaching arose from the supreme, nondual (non-conceptual, no subject/object separation) primordial source of all phenomena as revealed to the ancient *rishis* (sages) through their liberation/enlightenment *samadhi/moksha*, thus they are referred to as *shruti* (revealed sacred sound), and are held to be of non-human, divine origin (*apauruseya*). *Vedanta* then is based, not on the teaching of a founder as is exoteric-conventional Buddhism and Christianity, but on the twelve principal or essential *Upanishads* as revealed in the above four parts of the *Vedas*, and on the primary commentaries on the *Vedanta* (*Brahma*) *Sutra*. The Twelve Principle *Upanishads* are: *Aitareya* and *Kuashitaki Upanishad* (*Rigveda*); *Chandogya* and *Kena Upanishad* (*Samaveda*); *Taittiriya*, *Katha*, *Shvetashvatara*, *Brihadaranyaka* and *Isha Upanishad* (*Yajurveda*); *Prashna*, *Mundaka* and *Mandukya Upanishad* (*Atharvaveda*).

Sanatana Dharma, The Hindu Religious Complex and Brahman: From the primordial teaching of the truths of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* came not only *Vedanta*, but the entire *Sanatana Dharma*, the “eternal religion” of Hinduism based in this revealed *shruti* of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. From this has sprung the *puranas*, the orthodox devotional scriptures of Brahmanism, Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism (*Tantrism*), that are the major religious traditions of Hinduism. The Vedic-Hindu tradition has in turn, been influenced by non-Hindu traditions, especially Buddhism (Buddha is seen as a Hindu *avatar*), but also Islam, Jainism, Sikhism and Christianity.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the “philosophical gospel” of Hinduism, Lord Krishna instructs his friend and devotee, Arjuna in the secret yogas of the path to the realization of the Ultimate Reality. These yogic disciplines comprise the spiritual practice of the *shad-darshana*, the views of the six orthodox Hindu philosophical schools: *Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Samkhya*, *Yoga* (especially the *Raja Yoga* of Patanjali), *Mimamsa* and *Vedanta*. The yogic practices are: *Karma Yoga*, *Bhakti Yoga*, *Jnana Yoga* and *Raja Yoga* (respectively, selfless activity, devotion, discriminating wisdom and meditation). However, *yogic* (union) practice predates even the ancient *Vedas* with pre-historical pictorial evidence of *yogic asanas* (meditative postures) from the Indus Valley circa 2500 BCE.

The primary teaching of the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and *Vedanta* is the relationship of the essential divine *Atman*-Self of each individual to Brahman, the divine Absolute, the supreme source of everything. The nondual view, which is the view of Shankara’s *Advaita Vedanta*, but is also found in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, is that the supreme *Atman*-Self that we are, and Brahman, the divine source of the Self are identical. There is no essential separation. Henceforth, we shall consider only this nondual *Advaita Vedanta* view. This great view of nondual Ultimate Reality Itself and its “spiritual” realization by the yogi – aspirant arose as Hindu dialectical exegesis in a historical context within Hindu (*Nyaya*, *Samkhya*) and non-Hindu (*Buddhism*) philosophical systems. Thus, we will here emphasize ontological and epistemological analysis of Shankara’s scriptural exegesis, neglecting—with the notable exception of Ramana Maharshi—post-Shankara contributions to the great teaching. Shankara’s *Advaita Vedanta* view is generally considered definitive, and the *Viveka Chudamani* (Crest Jewel of Liberation) is his primary work.

Advaita (*advaya*, Skt.) means nondual. All dualities — subject/object, body/mind, mind/matter, matter/spirit, appearance/reality, existence/non-existence, finite/infinite are the result of ignorance (*avidya*). The *vidya*, (Tib. *rigpa*) of pure, naked awareness, the direct seeing of *Chan/Zen* (*kensho/satori*) reveals the prior, primordial unity and complementarity of all of these opposites. For those with eyes to see (*vidya*), Absolute Brahman is the transcendent yet immanent prior unity of the dualistic spacetime relative-conventional reality of appearance, with this nondual Absolute Reality. Just so, this is the unity of the finite and the infinite that transcends yet embraces it. As Brahman is the primordial sourceground or matrix base of all appearing phenomenal

reality, there cannot exist an **actual** duality or separation of the perceiving subject from Brahman, the ultimate subjectivity of the source. Yet, there is *Maya*, the **apparent** duality of “real” arising forms, that is, how they appear, and how they actually are. The essential nature of the individual then, is the perfectly divine, ultimately subjective *Atman*-Self that is identical to Brahman whose ultimate realization in human beings is *moksha*, liberation from the *samsara* of ignorance (*avidya*) that is the dwelling of the *jiva* (embodied ego) in *Maya* the relative-conventional phenomenal world of appearances.

Brahman and the Centrist View of Our Nondual Primordial Wisdom Tradition

Hegel stated correctly that all philosophical theories are reducible to some brand of idealism. From the view of relative-conventional truth, whether one examines the relationship between body and mind, mind and matter, matter and spirit, appearance and reality, the finite and the infinite, the goal of any conceptual, philosophical or comparative religious quest is the depth, the very source or ground, the base of the surface appearances. What we want is some permanent, ideal essence or Ultimate Reality beneath or beyond or prior to the arising phenomenal appearances. What is always infinite, eternal and changeless? What is *That* that remains as the very matrix of spacetime reality, at the root of attention, prior to our perceptual and conceptual seeking strategies. What is it that is always here, since before the very beginning? Even pure mechanistic materialism (physicalism) with its naive objectivist-realist denial of idealism is a gross form of idealism for it reduces all of appearing physical and mental reality to an **abstract idea** of concrete, purely physical substance. Material reality can be known only through sensation, perception and ideas, to wit, the mind. Who is it, one may ask, to whom, or in whom particular objective appearances of this “purely physical substance” appear? “In Whom does this all arise?” Material phenomena appear to a sensory, mental consciousness. Consciousness is necessarily prior. This is epistemological idealism.

In any case, at the root of our nondual Primordial Wisdom Tradition lies some brand of idealism, even—as in Buddhist *Madhyamaka* and *Advaita Vedanta*—when an objectively real relative-conventional reality is granted. **All of the diversity of our Great Tradition arises from the idea of a prior and fundamental transcendental unity or sourceground, or matrix base, by whatever name, that transcends yet embraces objectively appearing, physical reality.** According to this Great Wisdom Tradition, the essential nature of mind, the ultimate source of the relative mind through which phenomenal appearance arises is an utterly ineffable nondual metaphysical unity, an unbroken whole. (Nondual connotes no essential separation of subject and object, spirit and matter, appearance and Reality, etc.) It is this source that is the supreme identity of all beings and the basis of all reality, whether it is called

Eleutherios, Aperion, Brahman, Purusha, Dharmakaya, Tao, Samantabhadra, the immortal Father (Abba), or Ein Sof. The highest or most subtle nondual view of *Vedanta, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity*, indeed each of the traditions of our Great Wisdom Tradition share this same nondual Supreme Source or Absolute—godhead by whatever name—that abides, always present in sentient beings. The close similarity of Shankara’s conventionally “realistic” yet nondual idealism to the dialectical view of the *Mahayana’s Madhyamaka*, the Middle Way *Prasangika*, and the Vajrayana’s nondual Essence *Mahamudra* and *Dzogchen* further demonstrates this centrist idealist view of our nondual Primordial Wisdom Tradition. What makes these idealist views centrist? It is that they include a relative-conventional realism, an ontological middle way between eternalist monistic absolute realism (eg. scientific materialism) and nihilist monistic absolute idealism (eg. The denial of physical reality). However, we must remember that all-embracing Ultimate Spirit, infinite *cosmic Reality Itself*—by whatever name—transcends yet embraces all views and all realities. This reality is both origin and aim of all arising existence, and of all our seeking strategies. And, ultimately it utterly transcends any possible conceptual idea of it.

In the *Rigveda*, the oldest of the *Vedas* (circa 1500 to 1200 BCE) arises the first of humanity’s historical teachings on this Absolute nondual Supreme Source of Reality. Thus in the *Aitareya Upanishad*, according to Shankara, Brahman is the Supreme Source of what is when all subject-object dualism is transcended. Brahman is both the divine source or Base of what is, and as the *Atman*, the in-dwelling immediate presence (*vidya*) of that source in manifested reality and in the human bodymind, always at the spiritual heart (*hridayam*) of self-conscious beings. For Vedanta, the initial nondual realization of this great truth is *nirvikalpa samadhi*, then ultimately the seventh life stage *sahaj Samadhi* of the *mahasiddha*. Integration and actualization of this great realization into the yogi’s lifeworld is *moksha*, liberation from the forgetfulness and ignorance that is *avidya-Maya*, and always expressed as kindness and compassion (*ahimsa*).

There is a self-existent Reality that is the base of our awareness of our ego-I . . . that Reality is the primordial witness (*saksin*) that is our supreme self . . . liberated, luminous Spirit Itself . . . May this single statement transmit the secret essence of a thousand teachings: Brahman alone is real; the world is only appearance; the *Atman*-Self is always Brahman.

Shankara (1947)

Satchitananda

Truth is one; many are its names.

- *Rigveda*

For the spacetime bound ego (*jiva*) the form of nondual Brahman is *Satchitananda* (*sat/being, chit/consciousness, ananda/bliss*). *Satchitananda* is the relative-conventional name-form (*namarupa*) understanding of *That* that is utterly ineffable to the egoic, discursive concept-mind. Brahman is pure Being Itself (*Sat*), without qualities or attributes, including the attribute of being without attributes. Brahman is the prior unity of awareness-experience with the nondual source, the unbounded whole in whom it all arises. Consciousness (*chit*) is the pure primordial awareness that arises as light energy-motion forms—qualities and attributes—and animates individual awareness in sentient beings, including self-awareness in self-conscious beings. *Chit* is the potential of the consciousness or awareness of the changeless witness (*saksin*) presence, *Atman, Purusha*, our perfect, luminous, always present *vidya-rigpa* presence of nondual spirit that is Primordial Consciousness-Being Itself. This divine, unconditioned, non-egoic witness views all arising physical, emotional, and mental states as but the non-intentional play (*lila*) of our perfectly subjective source-condition, the Supreme Source that is but the random play of Brahman. From the relative view, the path of the yogi and yogini is the choice to recognize and enter into the *Atman* witness presence. Bliss (*ananda*) is the ecstatic affective or emotive component (*bhakti*) of such divine enlightenment experience (initial *moksha*). Is Brahman this pure ecstatic experience of *Satchitananda*? No. Brahman is not an experience. “There is no better description of Brahman than this—it is *neti, neti*; not this, not this”; “I am not this, I am not that” (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad II*). Thus any and all relative, conditional, conceptual attributes and qualities of Brahman are limitations (*upadhi*) or projections (*vikshepa*) on Brahman who abides prior to all of these conditional limiting attributes, beyond all conceptual predicates, imputations and designations.

To apply a predicate (quality, attribute) to something is to impose a limitation upon it; for, logically, something is being excluded from the subject.

Eliot Deutsch (1969)

The cognitive, conceptual operations involved in naming necessarily separate us from that “other” named, thereby limiting or subtracting from it. And Brahman is that absolutely perfectly subjective limitless Being, without attributes, without an “other,” in whom everything arises, dwells and passes away. “It is that who pervades all.” And that is our actual identity. We are not separate from That. *Tat tvam asi*. “That thou art.”

The ego or separate soul self is a concept. God, the world, the mind, desires, action, sorrow and all other things are all concepts. . . There is nothing whatsoever except concepts . . . The mind is unreal, a magic show, absolutely non-existent . . . Abiding without concepts is the undifferentiated state . . .the Reality of the Supreme Absolute Being.

Sri Ramana Maharshi (1970)

Brahman, Atman and the Four Views

Atman is subtler than the subtlest and cannot be known through thought.

-*Katha Upanishad*

We have seen that the essential nature of the mind of the individual egoic self is that divine presence of the *Atman*-Self—beyond the **concept** of *Atman-Brahman*—that lives awake, although cloaked by *Maya*, and in a relationship of identity to Brahman, nondual Absolute Reality Itself. Remember that in the “*neti neti*” consideration we found that the *Atman*-Self was “not this, not that.” Indeed it is not a permanent ego or soul “self” at all. It is empty and devoid of any quality, attribute or self-nature, a “selfless Self.” What then is the nature of this primordial relationship of identity of *Atman-Brahman*?

We have surveyed the four views or responses to this divine presence—outer exoteric, inner esoteric, secret greater esoteric, and innermost secret nondual—whether we call the presence *Atman, vidya, rigpa, logos, te, saksin* or *shekhina*. During the first three life stages (Appendix A) the view is that of material acquisition and exoteric conventional religious concept and belief. But for those who enter the spiritual path, the obstructed personality dimensions begin to open to the light (*vidya*) of their always present *Atman*-presence. This is the beginning of the inner or “lesser esoteric view.” As insight and growth continue, the student aspirant accomplishes, then demonstrates the “secret” or “greater esoteric,” then “innermost secret” or nondual view that is the “wisdom of kindness,” compassionate lifeworld conduct/behavior.

In the relative-conventional, exoteric view or response, and in the lesser esoteric response, the soul or *Atman* presence is seen to be within, yet separate from the objective, egoic bodymind (*ahamkara*). Thus the view is dualistic. Here the soul is seen as independent, survives the bodymind, and may even transmigrate. Further, Brahman, the Absolute is seen to live within the soul or *Atman* of the bodymind. The nondual, greater esoteric view however, is the reverse. Here the bodymind and the *Atman*-self or soul presence at the spiritual heart is understood to arise from and continuously dwell in Brahman who transcends, yet always embraces it. It’s not, “Brahman is in me.” It’s “I am Brahman” (*Kham Brahm*). *Atman* and *Brahman* are the same. There is no essential separation, no separate self. Thus the view is nondual.

Whatever the path—material or spiritual—the dualistic lesser views evolve gradualist egoic seeking strategies for some future fulfillment and happiness of the conditional ego-I of the bodymind, and for avoidance of the discomfort and suffering that result from these strategies. Alas, we then become the apologists and advocates of these present lifestage developmental limits. Here the view is dualistic and problem centered, seeking an antidote, seeking reunion, always seeking something. We exhaust our brief lives justifying our seeking strategies for the happiness that is already here, abiding within at the spiritual heart (*hridayam*). The freedom centered nondual view however, realizes that seeking happiness to relive suffering is a form of suffering. “You cannot **become** happy; you can only **be** happy” (Adi Da Samraj). We cannot **become** God. There is **only** God. There is no ontological reunion or change in essence upon the realization that “I am Brahman,” because there was never a separation. This is the great nondual, non-conceptual realization.

Thus, in the “innermost secret” nondual view of *Advaita Vedanta*, there is no soul-self or “higher self” or *Atman* presence existing within, the individual bodymind. Rather, the bodymind, and the *Atman* soul-self, and indeed all of phenomenal reality is in, or is a manifestation or modification of nondual, perfectly subjective Absolute Spirit, Brahman, the Supreme Source. “If the view is dualistic, there can be no enlightenment.” Therefore, regarding the relative-conventional dualism of these two apparent entities, our *Atman* presence and sublime Brahman, there is no separation. No difference. *Atman* is the indwelling spiritual awareness of presence of the absolute subjectivity that is nondual Brahman. *Atman* and Brahman are an ontologically interdependent prior unity. The relationship of *Atman* to Brahman is that of identity.

Being Here: The Four Bodies of Spirit, The Four Faces of God

Atman, smaller than small, greater than great is hidden in the hearts of all living beings.

- *Katha Upanishad*

We have seen that Brahman is the nondual, divine, unqualified, unconditioned Absolute Reality Itself that transcends yet enfolds, pervades and embraces all of its relative conditional, spacetime emanations or manifestations. And this unqualified Absolute Reality is known to Shankara as *Nirguna* Brahman. Its arising spacetime manifestations - the dualistic world of subject and object - are *Saguna* Brahman, *Satchitananda*, Brahman with qualities or attributes. *Om* is the sign of *Nirguna* Brahman. And *Om* is the sign and support of *Saguna* Brahman. Eliot Deutsch points out that the epithet “nondual” is preferred to “monistic” to describe the ultimate subjectivity of Shankara’s Brahman, the Absolute, for monism usually refers to a unity or “oneness” of the cosmos of objectively appearing reality, but not beyond

to the *kosmos* of the great expanse of perfectly subjective ultimate reality that transcends and includes mere physical spacetime cosmos. Monism requires multiplicity, whole and parts. *Advaita Vedanta* reveals the ultimate non-existence of all dimensions – physical objective, spiritual subjective – of everything that arises from the primordial source, including the source itself (Deutsch, 1969).

Saguna Brahman is the Great Love, the “Lord of Love,” the “Refuge of Love,” our “Father in *Brahmaloka*” (heaven) who guides us to “the other side of *Maya*” (*avidya*-ignorance, *hamartia*-sin). This divine expression or modification of innermost secret Absolute Brahman has been, and always will be worshipped throughout relative earthtime by human beings as Ishvara, Brahma, Shiva, Shakti, Allah, Yahweh, *Abba* The Father, and all of the many names and forms of the myriad creator- sustainer-destroyer Gods worshipped by all of the self-conscious beings, whether physical, mental or causal, in all of the star systems throughout the infinite *kosmos*. **The divine ground or base of these dualistic gods is nondual Brahman—by whatever name—that pervades and embraces all things and all sentient beings, everywhere, the very unseparate, heart essence-presence of them, whether or not they are aware of it. It is this Brahman—the organizing, harmonizing, and unifying power of the Great Love—that binds together the worlds. And it is our intrinsic, indwelling, Primordial Awareness Wisdom (*jnana, yeshe, gnosis*) that recognizes, then realizes this great truth.**

Nondual *Nirguna* Brahman, perfectly subjective Primordial Awareness Itself manifests into the objective empirical world of becoming as the three conditional *upadhis*, the limits or dimensions or states that are the exoteric **Gross Body** (waking state), the esoteric **Subtle Body** (dream state) and the greater esoteric secret **Causal Body** (deep sleep state). *Turiya*, the nondual innermost secret and unobstructed fourth state is primordial absolute subjectivity, Ultimate Spirit, the nondual always present *Atman* presence that is identical to Brahman. That presence is the supreme identity of each individual. *Atman*-Brahman, as manifest in the three *upadis* is given three functional names. As the **Gross Body** it functions as *Virat*. As the **Subtle Body** it functions as *Prajapati* or *Hiranyagarbha*. As the **Causal Body** it functions as *Prana* or *Sutratman* (“thread-self”) the subtle threads of *Turiya* the Great Love that is Brahman, in whom arises all relative-conventional spacetime reality. This great process—these four faces of God—are the interdependent dialectic of the “Two Truths”—Absolute and Relative—of our great Primordial Wisdom Tradition.

The *Atman* is that by which the universe is pervaded, but which nothing pervades. . .
The wise man understands that the essence of Brahman and of *Atman* is Pure
Consciousness, and who realizes their absolute identity.

Shankara (Johnston 1946)

The light of that great being is the actual identity of each individual existence, each sentient being. *Tat tvam ami*—That I am—without a single exception.