

# Shankara's Advaita Vedanta

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The *Purusha*, the inner Self, dwells always at the Heart. That One is the Bright, the luminous immortal Self.

*Katha Upanishad*

Shankara's teaching on the *Upanishads*, *Vedanta (Brahma) Sutra* and *Bhagavad Gita* is the very nondual essence of *Vedanta*, and a sublime contribution to the world's spiritual literature, and to our nondual Great Wisdom Tradition teaching. Shankara (788-820) was the supreme adept-realizer of the Hindu *Upanishadic* tradition. In his thirty two years this great master and scholar re-established the authority of the *Vedas* against the prevailing Buddhist ideology of the time.

For Shankara's *Advaita Vedanta* the supreme truth of the three Hindu canons (the *Upanishads*, *Vedanta Sutra* and *Bhagavad Gita*) is the nondual nature of Brahman, Absolute Spirit that is Reality Itself. For the *Advaita Vedanta* of Shankara, Brahman is the nondual primordial awareness that is Absolute or Ultimate Consciousness Being Itself, "One, without a second," without limit, empty of all predicates, attributes and qualities, beyond concept and belief, or any subject-object dualism whatsoever. As we have seen, Shankara refers to this prior unity as *Nirguna* Brahman, the Absolute. *Satchitananda* however, is usually understood as *Saguna* Brahman, Brahman with relative qualities, the Great Love that is being (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*) and bliss (*ananda*). Ishvara (usually as the *Trimurti*) the primordial creator-God or creative principle of Brahman is also *Saguna* Brahman, the spacetime limited creator God, the cause of the conditional state of *ananda*/bliss and the object of the spiritual devotion of the devotee. *Nirguna* Brahman is pure nondual Being Itself; *Saguna* Brahman is pure Being in the various states and stages of becoming in spacetime reality. These two Brahman are not separate entities. These two aspects of the one great Reality, are the ontologically prior union of the dualism of being and becoming, of emptiness and form, of the Two Truths that are one absolute reality with its arising, unfolding relative phenomenal appearances. "The One is. The One is not" (Plato, *Parmenides*).

For Shankara then, *Nirguna* Brahman is the non-experiential, non-conceptual, uncreated nondual Base in whom arises the always present enlightened, pure luminous witness presence, the bright *vidya* of the *Atman*-Self that is only Brahman abiding at the heart of all beings. *Saguna* Brahman is the yogi's great bliss, *bhakti*, the joyous experiential state of devotion and compassion to God/Ishvara. If *Saguna* Brahman is the bliss of conditional *savikalpa samadhi*, then *Nirguna* Brahman is the pure, unelaborated, unconditional Primordial Awareness Itself. This pristine non-conceptual, nondual awareness realization of the *vidya-Atman* presence of that Absolute Reality is *nirvikalpa Samadhi*. Then, finally *sahaj samadhi*, *paravidya*, the yogi's perfect direct realization, the nondual Primordial Awareness Wisdom (*jnanalgnosis*) that 'I am Brahman,' *Tat tvam ami*, That I am! This state is the ontologically prior,

essential unity of the nondual supreme source and its bright *vidya* presence in beings, and Brahman is its ground. As *savikalpa*, *nirvikalpa* and *sahaj samadhi* is stabilized in the lifeworld through the spiritual path of the continuous practice of *jnana* yoga and the other yogas, the ignorance (*avidya*) that binds us to the wheel of *samsara* is replaced with *vidya*, the enlightenment of liberation from this suffering of *karma*, then the permanent realization — *moksha* (*mukta*) — expressed as compassionate conduct in the everyday lifeworld. *Moksha* liberation is the transcendental consciousness of *turiya*, the nondual “fourth state” (after waking, dreaming and deep sleep states) that is the prior primordial unity of *Nirguna* Brahman and *Saguna* Brahman.

### ***Kham Brahm, The Bright***

***Brahman is the Self, Brahman is the world.*** “All is Brahman... the Self is Brahman... I am Brahman... Brahman is the world.” Such piths from the *Upanishads* reveal the vital relationship between Brahman, the nondual monadic Absolute Reality, and the dualistic relative-conventional reality of the phenomenal world arising therein, including sensing, perceiving, thinking beings to ponder it all.

Truly, Thou art that, the Self that is nondual Brahman . . . the truth apart from which nothing is . . . thou art that because this whole world emanates from Brahman, which alone is, and is Brahman Itself. . . It can be comprehended only by the eye of wisdom and the experienced heart of the yogi. . . It is the substratum of the illusory world (*Maya*, *avidya*, *vikshepa*) that seems to be superimposed on it. It is the cause of the emanation, preservation, and re-absorption of the world. It is the supreme cause, whole, itself has no causes; all the worlds of name and form are its effects, yet it is distinct from cause and effect. It is neither existence nor non-existence . . . It is without attributes . . . The gross mind cannot reach it. It can be experienced only through *nirvikalpa samadhi*. It is Being-Knowledge- Bliss. It is single in essence . . . That Brahman which is all this, “That thou art” (*Tat tvam asi*).

- Sri Ramana Maharshi (1970)

For Shankara, Brahman, as the utterly unconditional Absolute, is the essence or *Atman*-Self at the spiritual heart of all sentient beings. Moreover, this self-nature of all beings, indeed all phenomenal existence arises as and is one with, or identical to Brahman. The ultimate “goal” of the path of human existence is the removal of the veil of ignorance (*avidya*, *Maya*) and the recognition (*paravidya*, *gnosis*) by the individual of this primordial relationship of identity with Brahman. From this realization one attains liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of suffering, death and rebirth. This realization that our actual identity — our supreme identity — is Brahman is the fruition

of our heart's desire. This realization is *paramananda* (*Buddhist mahasuka*) ultimate "Happiness Itself."

Beneath the dualism and the theism of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* then, at the very root of attention, we find an absolute, nondual spiritual unity of matter and spirit that was to be developed by Adi Shankara into a rigorous, non-objective yet conventionally realistic, absolute nondual monistic transcendental idealism. Although there are dualistic, pantheistic and theistic trends in the *Vedas*, *Advaita Vedanta* cannot be said to be theistic for the highest God Ishvara, with its *Trimurti*, the one whole with three forms—Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma—arises within, and is ontologically identical to the unconditional monadic nondual Absolute, beyond all relative experience, concept and belief. Shankara's nondual *Advaita Vedanta* view of the *Upanishads* was criticized, unconvincingly, by Ramanuja (Qualified Nondual *Vedanta*, and Madhva (Dualistic *Vedanta*) for this reason. It is exceedingly difficult for the conventional exoteric and esoteric religious consciousness to transcend theistic concept and belief to the utterly ineffable supreme nondual Base/source in whom this all arises. It is far easier to remain in our uncomfortable comfort zones of conceptual belief in a separate theistic creator God.

### *Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism*

The nature of mind is the unity of awareness and emptiness.

- Shakyamuni Buddha (*Prajnaparamita Sutra*)

Gautama Shakyamuni (c.566-486 BCE), the historical Buddha was acquainted with the theistic dualism of various *Vedic* and *Upanishadic* orthodox schools, and as Buddhism developed in India the apparent creator monotheism of the *Upanishads* with its exoteric, dualistic presumption of a permanent yet separate self *Atman* was rejected. (Dualistic theism may be a step toward nondual understanding.) However, the *Vedic/Upanishadic* doctrines of *Maya*, cause and effect *karma*, and *vidya-moksha* liberation from the suffering of *karma* were integrated into *Hinayana* and later *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* Buddhism. Yet, from the innermost secret nondual view of Shankara's *Advaita Vedanta* there is no contradiction in the *Atman-Self* doctrine and the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* or no-self, for when the *neti, neti* (not this, not this) *vichara* consideration (p.209) is carried to its ultimate conclusion, the ostensibly permanent and eternal incarnating *Atman-Self* that is Brahman of the *Upanishads*, is ontologically identical to the "emptiness of self" (*anatman*) of the *Madhyamaka Prasangika* (*Rangtong*), the great centrist view of *Mahayana* Buddhism. **That is, the *Atman-Self* is not, at its nondual root, an absolute, eternal, permanently existent substrate or self-entity at all, for it is identical to Nirguna Brahman which is "empty of all qualities and attributes," including the attribute of self-existence.** The Self that is *Atman-Brahman* is rather, the timeless, spaceless nondual Absolute or Ultimate

Reality. This Reality is eternal, not as temporal duration, but as the timeless moment now. It is permanent, not as existing forever in space, but as changeless and spaceless. However, to exoteric, conventional dualistic understanding, the incarnated Soul-Self *Atman* that is Brahman is a separate, permanently existing eternal entity. Thus the Buddhist criticism that nondual *Vedanta* is eternalist. However, to the nondual mind of enlightenment—the view of Ultimate Truth—the egoic *jivatma* self is always changing and impermanent, while the *Atman*-Self is unseparate from, identical to, and arises within the monadic, changeless, timeless, spaceless Nirguna Brahman, the nondual Ultimate Supreme Source. And, this is analogous to *Mahayana shunyata*/emptiness. Again, the *Atman*-Self that is Brahman is empty of all predicates, including inherent existence. The Truth—emptiness, Dharmakaya, etc. —is said to be empty in essence, luminous clarity in its nature, and compassionate in its energy expression. This could be said of Nirguna Brahman as well. **Therefore, the Buddhist criticism targets only the outer exoteric, theistic, dualistic Hindu view of Brahman, and not the more subtle nondual view of *Advaita Vedanta*.**

**The Emptiness of Emptiness.** Do the absolutes of *shunyata*/emptiness and Nirguna Brahman actually exist? Are they real? Are they existing entities? Yes and no. They do exist conventionally, nominally, conceptually. But they cannot be found under ultimate contemplative analysis, as Absolute Truth. They exist as “relative valid cognition” (*shadma*), but not as “ultimate valid cognition” (*pramana*). Thus they have no ultimate, permanent essence, no essential self-nature. Therefore, they are not ultimately, essentially intrinsically real. They are not some kind of absolute core, substrate, or creator of arising forms. The Buddhist Middle Way Consequence School (*Madhyamaka Prasangika*) refers to this truth of emptiness as the “emptiness of emptiness.” Vedantists speak of nondual Brahman as “empty of all qualities and attributes.” Thus *Shunyata* and Nirguna Brahman share the same nondual ontological status. “Truth is One, many are its names” (*Rig Veda*).

Some may charge that this reduction and identification of the “many names” of the great nondual Truth of Absolute Spirit, primordial awareness itself, especially the ontological identity of *Advaita Vedanta*’s nondual Brahman and *Madhyamaka*’s *shunyata*/emptiness constitutes the theoretical placement of “a yak’s head upon a sheep’s body” (or vice-versa). As seen above, the Buddhist criticism seems to reduce to a “straw man” argument. In any case, clearly, there are important relative conventional differences between the great traditions. However, the *rime* (lit. unbiased) ecumenical movement of twenty first century Buddhism and the emerging non-sectarian *rapprochement* of religion, science and culture of the unfolding New Reformation require that the relative truths of the exoteric- conventional biases of the old paradigm be surrendered to this re-emergence of the primordial nondual view, the view of the absolute or ultimate truth of the great Primordial Wisdom Tradition of humankind. These relative truths have been debated and fought over by exoteric and esoteric religion since we evolved a cortex and a sword. Indeed, that there is any greater truth

than the metaphysical presumptions of scientific materialism – the cult of scientism - is still denied by the fundamentalist values of the mind states of the first three life stages (Chap I and Appendix A). Now, at the dawn of this New Reformation of Synthesis, we are called to surrender our identity in these dualistic conceptual and belief systems of the past, while yet participating fully in our individual and thereby collective liberation through the very specific *sadhana*—view and practice—of a particular tradition within this Great Wisdom Tradition.