



Research Paper

## Vidya & Avidya in Advaita Vedanta

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'Vedanta' literally means end of the Vedas (*Vedasya antah*). The term 'End' signifies that Vedanta is the concluding portion of the Vedas or 'purpose', signifying the quintessence of the Vedic thought which appears in the form of Upanisadic reflections. 'Advaita' means one or non-dual (one without a second). *Advaita Vedanta* refers to the corpus of philosophical literature which offers monistic interpretation of the Upanisadic concept of reality, expounded by Acharya Sankar. In Advaita Vedanta the world of phenomenal diversities is traced to the desire of *Brahman* to become many.<sup>1</sup> Unlike deistic metaphysics or ontology where the Creator remains outside the creation, in the Upanisadic framework, the Creator himself became the creation and having created it, He entered into every created thing and being as its presiding essence.<sup>2</sup> *Brahman* is of the nature of Truth (*sat*). Consciousness (*chit*), Infinite (*anantam*).<sup>3</sup> Though the world is a phenomenal expression of Brahman which is infinite, it's infinity is not exhausted by its manifestations which are infinite. The transcendence of Brahman is brought out in the invocation of *Isopanisad*.<sup>4</sup> When Brahman the formless, appears as many, it takes the forms (*rupa*) and names (*nama*) by which it is identified. 'Truth' is that which is non-sublatable (*satyam abadhitam*), The expression '*Brahman satyam Jagatmithya*', means that the ultimate reality is non-sublatable in principle and the phenomenal reality is illusory or relative in so far as the sense of plurality or diversity disappears when one attains knowledge of the ultimate substance. Just as 'dream-experience' turns out to be illusory as it is sublated by waking experience, the world of names and forms is realized to be unreal when one attains the knowledge of the non-dual substance. 'Consciousness' is not a property of *Brahman* but is constitutive of *Brahman*. *Anandam* refers to the affective description of Brahman because on attaining it one experiences bliss. The world (*jagat*) has its origin in bliss (*anandam*), is sustained in Bliss (*anandam*) and eventually finds its fruition by entering into the state of Bliss (*anandam*).<sup>5</sup> 'Bliss' is different from 'Pleasure'. Pleasure is that which is transient because the genesis of pleasure in the objects is relative and impermanent. Bliss is nothing but the unpunctuated eternal pleasure which doesn't suffer from any increase or decrease.<sup>6</sup> 'Infinity' (*anantam*) is not a negation of the finite but it refers to a state of existence whereof one becomes Infinite.

The relationship between Brahman and the world (*jagat*) is elucidated by the notion of '*Maya*' and '*Avidya*'. '*Maya*' refers to the potency of *Brahman* to appear as many. It is elucidated by the analogy of rope and snake, wherein a rope is mistaken to be snake. Anything and everything cannot produce the illusion of a snake. It is only 'rope' which by virtue of possessing snake-like properties can give rise to the illusion of 'snake'. Similarly, *Brahman*, on account of its inherent potency, can only appear as the world of many. Given the substance 'rope', everyone does not have the illusion of snake. It is either because of inadequacy of light or a person who has the fear psychosis about snake, tends to fall into snake- illusion. So, the nature of the object 'rope' as well as the limitations of the observer, do contribute to the genesis of illusion. Similarly, those who are under the spell of *Avidya* (ignorance), mistake the names and forms to be real (*sat*). When the limitations of the observer are removed the real nature of the given reality i. e, rope is revealed. Similarly, when *avidya* is overcome by cultivation of right knowledge (*vidya*) Brahman, ultimate reality is revealed in its true nature. One who knows that the names and forms are nothing but varied ways in which *Brahman* appears, does not fall into

illusion. *Vidya* is that which liberates one from the bondage of names and forms. So long as one perceives the diversities or manyness one remains subjected to bondage'

In *Advaita Vedanta* the phenomenon of 'illusion' is elucidated by the notion of *Adhyasa*. *Adhyasa* refers to the act of superimposition on account of which a given object or reality is perceived as something else (*atasmim tadbuddhi*). In case of snake-rope illusion, what is out there is 'rope' but the snake cognition is superimposed on the 'given' by the observer.' As a result, the rope is wrongly perceived as a snake. To know the reality in its native stance amounts to real knowledge. 'Knowledge' presupposes the duality between the Subject (*jnata*) and 'object' (*jneya*). It is noteworthy that self (*atman*) which is the subject of all cognitions is non-different from *Brahman* which is the object of highest knowledge.<sup>7</sup> So, *Brahman* is both the subject and object of highest knowledge. Thus, there is the oddity of knowing *Brahman* as the object of knowledge. How can *Brahman* which is infinite be the object of knowledge who is finite? Instead of making room for agnosticism *Advaitins* moot an ulterior mode of knowing whereof the subject knows the object by becoming the object in transcending the dichotomy between the subject and object. Finite can know the infinite only by becoming the 'infinite'. The knower of *Brahman* becomes *Brahman*.<sup>8</sup> *Atman* is nothing other than *Brahman*, quiescent in every particular. This finds its graphic expression in the *Bhagavad Gita* in the notions of *Ksetra* and *Ksetrajna*. *Ksetra* is the psycho-physical base constituted by the *gunas* of *Prakrti* and *Ksetrajna* is the presiding consciousness (*atman*) which resides in the *ksetrajna* (self) in residing in different *ksetras* are non-different from one another and are non-different from *Purusottama* (transcendental self).

As sensory competence is insisted upon in case of empirical knowledge, ethical competence is insisted upon in respect of highest knowledge. One has to have control over lower propensities so that one remains immune to the influence of *avidya*.<sup>9</sup> In case of empirical knowledge (*aparavidya*), the knower and known are independent. Knowledge is discovery. But in case of *Brahman* knowledge, the subject undergoes transformation progressively so that the finiteness of the 'finite' is transcended and it gets perfected on attaining the state of Infinity. In other words, the Self which is potentially infinite becomes actually infinite when it shakes off the cover of *avidya*. In *vedantic* epistemology *Maya* refers to the cosmic potency of *Brahman*. *Maya* is macrocosmic whereas *avidya* is connotative of the native limitations of the knower or the individual and it is microcosmic. *Advaitins* underline the role of self-effort to overcome the spell of *Avidya*. As by knowing substance all the modifications of the substance is known *Brahman* is conceived as that by knowing which everything is known. *Sravana* (hearing), *manana* (reflection) and *nididhyasana* (meditation) have been outlined as threefold ways by which one can shake off the *avidya* and have the vision of oneness beneath apparent diversity. When one knows it for certain that the differences are apparent and deep within there is a reality which is not subject to change or mutation, one gets liberated from the bondage of plurality. Thus, in *Vedantic* epistemology 'knowledge' makes a difference to the 'knower'. The subject-object duality is transcended in the holistic awareness when the unit consciousness (*anu-chaitanya*) gets transmuted into cosmic consciousness (*bhuma chaitanya*).

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