



ADVAITA IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Lecture One

These lectures were delivered in Michaelmas Term (Oct.-Dec. 2003). They are intended to introduce the basic tenets of Advaita tracing it from the period of Gaudapada through Sankara to the present day Advaitins. They examine the philosophical subtleties of Advaita, its enrichment through productive dialogue with other schools and also its impact on the society. These are designed for students in Indian Philosophy, Theology and Religious studies and do not require in-depth understanding of Indian scriptures. However, they could also be of particular interest to advanced students of Indology and Sanskrit studies.

Introduction:

The word "Advaita" refers to a system of Vedantic thought which believes in a non-dualistic ultimate reality. Although the late 7th century C.E. Vedantin Shankaracarya is the chief exponent of this system, he is not the first to have propounded this thinking. Vedanta claims its allegiance to the Vedas and as the term indicates, it means the last part of the Vedas. The Vedas are divided into four parts viz. Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanisads. The last part called Upanisad is otherwise known as Vedanta or as the system which has the Upanisads as its pramana. (vedanto nama upanisat pramanam). However, Upanisads do not always come last since some of them are found in the Aranyaka portion like Taittiriya, while others are in Brahmana portion like Brhadaranyaka.

The Vedas consist of two parts; the first is known as Karmakanda and the second as Jnanakanda. It is the Jnanakanda that is traditionally named Vedanta, the source for Vedanta thinking. There are several schools of Vedanta. Why should there be many Vedantic schools? The answer to this question lies in conceiving reality in multifarious ways by eminent teachers (acaryas), through textual exegesis. All Vedantic schools agree that Brahman is the supreme reality. They also accept the Vedas as the source of Brahman-knowledge. Yet they disagree in their conception of the nature of the ultimate reality as portrayed in the Vedas. If the Vedas have a large number of statements about oneness or non-difference, they also contain a considerable number of statements that seem to assert the existence of duality. The former type of statements is known as

abheda-sruti and the latter as bheda-sruti. Among Vedantins, those who give more importance to abheda-sruti are Advaitins, and Shankara belongs to this group. Advaitins interpret bheda-sruti passages in a way that suits their concept of reality. For Advaitins, the chief import of the Vedas lies in abheda-sruti passages only. The reverse is true for the dualist school of Madhva. The latter says that the chief import of the Vedic passages lie in portraying difference i.e. bheda. In his view, abheda passages are secondary (gauna) and are meant to show the supreme quality and independent nature of God, Lord Vishnu. God alone is svatantra, independent, and all else, consisting of world and souls, are paratantra, that is, dependent, and it is only as such that their being becomes meaningful.

Another influential interpreter of the Vedanta texts is Ramanuja. He distinguishes himself from both Shankara and Madhva in holding that both types of scriptural passages are equally meaningful. His interpretation is known as bheda-abheda for it tries to accommodate all types of Sruti passages. For Ramanuja, the Karmakanda is as important as the Jnanakanda as they form a single text (aikyashastra). Hence, the Jnanakanda does not have any preeminence or superiority over karmakanda as Shankara and other Advaitins assert. Historically, Ramanuja's advent is prior to that of Madhva. The former's exegetical position, which gives equal weight to both types of scriptural passages, became, understandably, unacceptable to Madhva who was a radical theist. Ramanuja says that God is different from the souls and the world, even though they form his body, there is sarirasariribhava between them. Madhva appreciates the idea of difference propounded by Ramanuja but says that the latter has compromised with the Advaitic school in propounding the idea of difference/non-difference. To Madhva, difference must be total, and it is on this ground that he presents the idea of five-fold differences (pancabheda). While the tradition of Madhva never thrived, following the tradition of Nathamuni and Yamuna, Ramanuja's writings became the solid foundation for all theistic schools of Vaishnavism, which multiplied in later periods.

Basic Doctrines of Advaita Vedanta:

The main tenet of the system of Advaita Vedanta is that there is nothing but the non-dual supreme reality that is without any qualities or characteristics. It is this basic conception of reality that caused inconvenience to Ramanuja. He objected to the proposition that one could contemplate a reality that is free from distinctions. According to him, there cannot be any content to what has no characteristics. Thus, to assert a

contentless cognition is a contradiction in terms. Another important and distinct feature of Advaita Vedanta is the doctrine of maya, which is identical with avidya. Maya is responsible for the appearance of Brahman as God, the individual souls, and the world. The followers of Ramanuja do not admit to the existence of maya. For them, the concept of maya is a pseudo concept with no standing at all. In his Mahapurvapaksha, Ramanuja puts forth seven objections to the Advaitic concept of maya, and in post-Ramanuja Visishtadvaita, these objections multiply. A third important feature of Advaita is that the state of God and the soul are illusory, while the essential nature of both are real. Ramanuja and Vaishnava Vedantins do not accept that either of them could be illusory. A fourth key tenet is that the world is superimposed on Brahman through maya and that it is neither real nor unreal but indeterminable (anirvacaniya). For Vaishnava thinkers, the world is real. A fifth distinctive feature of Advaita Vedanta is that the direct knowledge of the true nature of the individual soul as Brahman is the sole means to liberation. In contrast, Vaishnava thinkers argue that by knowledge alone one cannot obtain liberation; if Knowledge is necessary, it is not sufficient. Knowledge remains incomplete in the absence of karma and bhakti. However, Shankara holds that karmas and bhakti are subordinate means to liberation and that knowledge alone constitutes the direct means to liberation. A sixth main feature of Advaita Vedanta is that liberation can be had right here and right now. Advaitins believe in two forms of liberation, in this life (jivanmukti) and post-mortem (Videhamukti). In contrast, the Vaishnava schools accept Videhamukti alone.

The study of God (Isvara), the souls (jivas) and the world (jagat), is common to all Vedantic schools. Theistic schools consider these three categories to be distinct realities. Advaita posits that they are the manifestation of Brahman, which is pure or non-dual consciousness. Maya, Advaitins hold, conceals the true nature of Brahman and projects the world, the souls, and God. God and souls are complex entities consisting of a sentient element called consciousness and of an insentient element called maya-avidya. The essential nature of God is the sentient element, consciousness, which is known as Brahman; that of the jiva is known as Atman. The important point is that although the state of being God and a soul are illusory, their essential nature is real. In contrast, the world has no independent reality; it is a mere appearance of Brahman through maya like

a rope-snake that appears due to ignorance. In Advaita, God is always aware of his essential quality as Brahman and thus is ever liberated. The jiva, who wrongly identifies with the mind, body and the sense organs, is ignorant of his essential nature and undergoes transmigration. Advaitins say that the jiva's wrong identification, a product of ignorance, can be removed by the correct knowledge that his true nature is Brahman alone.

From the above discussion it can be seen that the term "Advaita" indicates Brahman that is devoid of duality. It also refers to the Vedantic school which advocates that reality is non-dual. I would now like to refer to one Advaita or Advaya tradition which was prevalent on the Indian subcontinent much before the advent of Acarya Shankara. The writer of Amarakosa refers to Buddha as Advayavadin,¹ and a close study of the Mandukyakarika reveals a notable Buddhist influence in Gaudapada's formulation of non-dual Vedanta. In his commentaries on the Mandukyakarika, Shankara himself is not that vociferous in criticizing the teachings of the Buddha. However, his criticisms are much sharper in his commentary on Brahmasutra Tarkapada. There, he says that the Buddha must have had some hatred for his subjects since he propagated a thesis with contradictory views.² Although Shankara does not seem to have much respect for the Buddha, the latter's teachings must have exercised some influence on Shankara's thinking. Further, analyzing the thinking of the Buddha, we find that he had himself been very much influenced by the Upanisads, even though he strongly denied the authority of the Vedas. To my mind, Buddha wanted to do away with the karmakanda portion of the Vedas as well as with the prerogatives of the Brahmin class, preeminent during his period. Otherwise, his teachings can be easily traced to the Upanisads. In fact, Gaudapada questioned the existence of a distinct Buddhist ideology lying beyond the pale of the Upanisads, and attempted a reconciliation between the Upanisads and Buddhism. After Gaudapada, it was Acarya Shankara who tried to reconstruct Advaita with the aids of logic and scriptures. He argued that Buddhism is opposed to both scriptures and reason and that thus, it is unreliable as a soteriological scheme. In his commentary on the

¹. ùaóabhijno dasavalo'dvayavadi vinayakah

². yada ayam saugatasamayah upapattimatvaya parikate tada tada sikata kupa vad visiryate eva. Natra kimcid upapattim pasyamah, bahyarthavada-vijnanavada-sunyavada tritayam itaretaraviruddham upadisata sugatena spastikrtam atmanah asmbaddha pralapitvam, pradveso va prajasu. Atah anadaraniyoyam saugatasamayah sreyaskamaih ityabhiprayah.

first verse of the fourth chapter of the Mandukyakarika, Shankara interprets dvipadam varam as Vishnu although with regard to the context, it would have been more appropriate to gloss it as Buddha. It is also worth noting that the doctrine of maya was prevalent in the pre-Gaudapada period. Sadyojyotis, a Kashmiri shaiva scholar, criticizes this doctrine without mentioning once Gaudapada or Shankara. Perhaps this doctrine is evident in the Upanisads themselves. This is surely the view of Shankara concerning all the tenets mentioned above. Shankara's tradition is Upanisadic as he himself reminds us many times in his Bhasya: "Asmakam tu aupanisadam darsanam. "

In his Mandukyakarika Bhasya, Shankara glosses the word advaita as "advaitam caturtham manyante sa atma sa vijneyah." In his Siddhantabindu, Madhusudana Sarasvati defines Advaita as "nasti dvaitam yatra." He feels that to counter the Madhyamikas who also talk of a non-dualistic entity called "shunya," it is necessary to use "yatra" to make clear that the locus (yatra) that is Brahman, is free from duality. As already noted, Madhyamika talks of shunya as non-dual reality. However, there is no need for a substratum in that system. In Advaita Vedanta, the definition of advaita is sensibly different since the word "yatra" indicates a locus that is Brahman. The mere use of words like "eka" or "aikya" cannot suffice to indicate Vedantic non-dualism since a number of Vaishnavava schools speak of the supreme reality as eka, i.e., Vishnu being the only reality. Hence, the word Advaita seems to be more appropriate for a pure non-dualistic system which does not accept any duality in its understanding of the ultimate reality.

In fact, both traditions of Advaita and Visishtadvaita operate in advaita and dvaita. They are non-dual and dual at the same time, with differences arising in the emphasis placed by the acaryas. Even Shankara has to contend with the world of duality at least insofar as it is necessary to making the Vedantic teachings meaningful. It is obviously not for the jivanmuktas that Shankara wrote his commentaries, but for the benefit of the people who are in the world of duality and who desire liberation. It is for them alone that the entire tradition must be meaningful. In some respect, the Visishtadvaita tradition is also non-dualistic since it accepts Vishnu as the supreme reality. The crux of the problem between the Advaita and Visishtadvaita traditions is whether or not to accept the doctrine of maya. The famous Vaishnava teacher Caitanya does not want to concern himself with such deliberations and refuses to brand reality at all. To him, the supreme reality is

beyond thinking (acintya). Thus we observe that these two interpretive schools of Vedanta include both dual and non-dual dimensions in their philosophical enterprises. Of course, it would be quite naïve to think that they both teach the same thing, for their final philosophical positions cannot easily coexist.

Advaita darshana:

‘Drs,’ the verbal root of darshana, means seeing. In the Advaita tradition, it implies the direct realization of reality or Brahman (prameya), free from any obstruction (Darshanam nama pratibandharahitam pratyaksajnanam). Darshana is doubtless, free of error and not dependent on inference (samsaya rahitam, viparyayahitam and anumanaanapeksam jnanam). Darshana also involves the direct knowledge that one's own self is Brahman. The concept of darshana includes the system of philosophy through which such knowledge is imparted, i.e., pedagogical methods, principles of textual interpretation, applied reasoning, etc. Because of its emphasis on knowledge, epistemology is particularly important in Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Indeed, Advaitins, though it is also true for most Indian thinkers, reckon that the ascertainment of a prameya, an object of knowledge, is totally dependent on a valid means of knowledge.³ According to Advaita Vedanta, the most important prameya to know corresponds to man's highest desirable object (purushartha), which is Brahman. In Indian thought, life, considered in all of its aspects, should tend towards the fulfillment of man's highest goal, which is liberation. Thus Advaita darshana is value oriented and has, since its inception, successfully established a relation between values and actions. Among the values, which it recognizes, i.e., dharma, artha, kama and moksha, the first three have an extrinsic value, being instrumental to moksha, which is alone of intrinsic value. Moksha or liberation is unsurpassably worth because it is identified with pure existence (sat), consciousness (cit), and bliss (ananda).

Advaitins are adamant that it is the Upanisadic revelation (Sruti) that constitutes the sole means of knowing Brahman, which culminates in liberation. If Sruti is sacred because it leads to liberation, its authority is not inflexible in the sense that it binds all men at all times. Surely, Sruti does not bind whoever has reached the unexcelled state of Brahman. Once truth is known, the Upanisads tell us, the Vedas become non-Vedas

³. Manadhina meyasiddhih

(yatra vedah avedah bhavanti). As far as I am aware, no other religion in the world has a revelation that openly cancels its authority out.

Since, in Advaita Vedanta, the whole world is ultimately false (jagatmithya), Sruti as word (sabda) is also false. Still, Sruti has the capacity to denote what is true. Nobody argues that the word water cannot, indeed, indicate its referent, i.e., water. Sruti can very well fulfill a similar purpose, with the notable difference that its referent is supersensuous. Whether an object lies within or beyond the sphere of the senses, once it is known, the words that have brought about its knowledge are no longer useful. It is in that sense that the Sruti declares that with the dawn of knowledge, the Vedas become Avedas.

It is usually thought that Shankara is the earliest exponent of Advaita. This is absolutely false since, as mentioned before, Gaudapada was a prominent expounder of the Advaita tradition. Further, even some of the oldest Upanisads list the names of the traditional exponents of Vedanta. The lord Narayana is said to have been the first teacher of Brahma-vidya. Brahma was his disciple. In turn, Brahma taught this vidya to his son Vasistha. Subsequently, this knowledge was passed on to Sakti, Parasara, Vyasa, and Suka, in a father to son relation. Not being married, Suka taught Brahma-vidya to his disciple Gaudapada. Shankara received this traditional knowledge of Brahman from Gaudapada's disciple Govindabhagavatpada. Shankara's chief literary contributions are his commentaries on the principal Upanisads, the Brahmasutras, and the Bhagavadgita. It is difficult to know anything with certainty concerning the life and work of Shankara because there is no reliable biographical source about him. The various available biographies are, for the most part, little more than legendary tales. It is not even possible to ascertain the dates of Shankara from the literature that is available at his mathas.

Still, in seeking to understand Shankara's life and thought, we should not isolate him from his age. The historical figure Shankara is definitely inseparable from the society in which he lived, and his works can only be understood in terms of the Indian religio-cultural movements of the 7th and 8th centuries C.E. It is during this period that Buddhism was fast declining and that the Smarta-pauranika religious trend was emerging. Bhakti and Tantra, abstract logic and polemical metaphysics, new ways of devotion and social codes, were developing side by side. It is against this background that Shankara

presented, in a quite inimitable manner, the perennial Advaita philosophy of which he was the heir. The bulk of his writings became the standard and authoritative non-dual interpretation of Vedanta. Shankara never encouraged social eligibility for pursuing Vedantic studies. Shankara sought to clarify the teachings of Vedanta through elaborations on crucial concepts such as pravrtti dharma and nivrtti dharma, Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman, vyavahara and paramartha, etc. He also was, in my mind, successful at bringing together jnana, karma, and bhakti, which were burning issues in his time. His writings allow the coexistence of faith with reason and spiritual experience. Indeed, the doctrine of the identity between the self and Brahman necessitates faith in Sruti, reasoning in accord with Sruti, as well as personal experience. Shankara makes use of a variety of hermeneutical processes to interpret Sruti as well as to do away with the aspirant's instinctive and philosophical prejudices, so as to render personal experience of Brahman possible. The analysis of the phenomenon of self-awareness is perhaps the most important of all processes used throughout his writings. In this regard, he appeals to two basic principles, a) that the subject can never become the object and b) that the real can never be negated. It is on these axiomatic principles that he speaks of empirical consciousness and existence as false or illusory, the unsublatable and pure consciousness present in all beings, being the only reality that ever was, is, and will be.