

## Metaphysics of the Advaita Vedānta School.

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Advaita Vedānta is a school in Indian philosophy that teaches *non-dualism*. Typically, we see the world in terms of a duality of subject and object. I am over here, viewing the world from my consciousness, within my body, while the world is out there, separate from me, sometimes conforming to my desires, and sometimes frustrating them. This dualism can lead to great frustration. The world beyond is alien to us, and operates according to a logic that sometimes appears hostile to us. Other people sometimes make us happy, but they can also deviate from our expectations, and we suffer constant instability in our relationships with what appears to be other than us.

But, Advaita Vedānta dissolves this dualism, in an idealist monism. That is, Advaita Vedānta is an idealist philosophy, insofar as it posits mind as the fundamental reality. It is also a monistic philosophy, since it posits only one substance. There is no plurality, but only one universal mind, Brahman, that is both transcendent and immanent. That is, Brahman is both above the world, as its creative source, but also within the world, as part of the fabric of its identity.

We think our individual selves, and the world, are distinct from their transcendent source. But, Advaita Vedānta actually teaches that, though these entities may appear different, this appearance is not ultimately real, and all are one. The individual self is not, at bottom, distinct from the creative source of things. The experiencing self (*jīva*) and the transcendent self (*ātman*) are one thing, even though, in our experience, there is a real difference between the experiencing self and the transcendent self.

There is a handy saying that can help us grasp the basic truth of non-dualism. “Brahman is alone True, and this world of plurality is an error; the individual self is not different from Brahman.” The only ontological reality, once we resolve all the constructions of our cognitive apparatus, is Brahman. The individual self, and the world with all its manifold content, are not actually independent realities in their own right. They only appear as independent. We mistakenly think that the plurality of the world is independent from Brahman, due to our *avidya*, or ignorance. Our spiritual task is to overcome our ignorance, and to see all the diverse components of the world, as one with the universal mind.

***Avidya and Māyā.*** So, for the Advaita Vedānta tradition, the fundamental reality is the pure consciousness, existence, and bliss of Brahman. There is no independent substance apart from this pervasive reality. There is “no second” to this pervasive mind. The appearance of diverse entities in our ordinary consciousness, distributed in different places in space and

time and presenting a multiplicity, is a cognitive construction of our minds. *Māyā* is the name for this appearance of multiplicity. It is real *for us*, from our limited cognitive perspective, but not real from an absolute perspective.

*Māyā* is, therefore, neither totally real, nor totally unreal. It is not totally real, because we realize, from an absolute perspective, that there is no multiplicity and that everything ultimately is the pure consciousness of Brahman. But, *Māyā* is also not totally unreal either. *Māyā* exists from our perspective. The multiplicity of the world is very palpable for us, from our finite and limited perspective. We can talk about it and navigate it intelligibly. Google Maps helps us to navigate the separate sectors of space, and our watches keep track of separate moments of time. But, this layer of reality, in the experiential world, is not the absolute reality. We reach knowledge of absolute reality, in which all multiplicity dissolves in Brahman, through the process of *sublation*.

**Application to Separation.** So, what does this metaphysical knowledge have to do with our practical lives? In our practical lives, we have to navigate the world of multiplicity. When we go to the store, we see a multiplicity of items. We cannot effectively shop, if all we see is Brahman. Our social media feed consists of a multiplicity of people. We cannot interact effectively with other people, if we see them all as one. We have to know each person by name, and distinguish them. Otherwise, our social life will just be a blur.

But, in contemplation, we can sublimate our awareness of multiplicity, and recognize that, in essence, reality really is one. And this can have very powerful healing effects on what is a source of great pain for all of us at some point, the separation and rupture of human relationships.

What is more painful in life than the separation and rupture of our relationships? Divorce, breakup, death, people we care about refusing to speak with us...All these situations are sources of great pain.

Do we simply accept the pain and mutely carry on, as we bleed internally? Or, worse, do we have to become hysterical and angry at life and the world, because of the inevitable reality of rupture?

I think neither of these options are necessary, if we apply the knowledge of Advaita Vedānta to the crisis of separation. If we apply Advaita Vedānta and its teaching of oneness in Brahman, then we realize that separation is in fact an obstacle we can overcome.

If we look at separation from our finite perspective, it seems as though our self, and the self of the loved one, are far apart. So, let us say, one's spouse has gone sour, and has demanded a divorce. This is deeply hurtful, even devastating. One used to be so close to

the spouse, but the spouse now is living separately and their communication is strictly about legal matters, very cold.

But, this separation is only from one's finite perspective. It is real. Advaita Vedānta is not claiming that this separation, from our finite perspective, is just an illusion. There is definitely a difference between the state when your spouse was close to you, and when he or she is separate.

But, from the absolute perspective, there really is no difference. You, and the spouse, are still manifestations of the one reality of Brahman. There really is no distinction between you and your spouse, once we get past the appearance of multiplicity, which is just a cognitive construction of our minds.

We can cherish this ongoing unity in times of separation. Advaita Vedānta can help us to cope with the various forms of separation we experience in life. Advaita Vedānta is not claiming that there is no difference between having loved ones near, and facing separation from them through illness, separation, rupture, or death. This difference is real, but it exists only on the empirical level of appearances. From the absolute perspective, reality is one, and so we cannot establish boundaries of separation in an objective way, apart from our perspective. There are no true boundaries in absolute reality, but they only exist at the level of appearances.

**Space and Time.** Plurality unfolds across space and time. We identify things as different, in large part because they occupy different parts of space and different times. The expanses of space and time form the metaphysical framework of grief and pain from separation. We mourn, when loved ones are far away from us in space, or they exist in the past, because they have died.

But, we can take comfort in the fact that distribution across space and time is not an absolute reality. Loved ones may appear far away, but once we access the higher self in meditation, we can discern our ultimate unity. If reality is only one, Brahman, then there can be no ontologically real separation. Separation is only experiential.

Once we shift from the idea that "I am limited," i.e. I am just one individual, part of a vast multiplicity of individuals, to the idea that "I am everything," i.e. I identify with the fundamental reality of consciousness constituting the ultimate reality of things, we can remedy our grief. Grief comes from the idea that we are limited beings, susceptible to changes in fortune that place us in one limited spatiotemporal location, away from another spatiotemporal location, which the beloved occupies. But, Brahman, the ultimate reality, has no spatiotemporal limitations. If we can identify with Brahman, we can also identify

with the reality of our loved ones, since there is no spatiotemporal separation in Brahman. Loved ones are also part of Brahman.

To sum up, Advaita Vedānta identifies three levels of reality. There is the plane of absolute existence, known as *paramarthika satta*, which is what exists ultimately, apart from our distorted perceptions. We seek to grasp this absolute existence in meditation. Instead of seeing ourselves as a separate ego, susceptible to change and the shifting configurations of our relationships, with people coming and going, we anchor ourselves in the one eternally stable reality.

There is also the plane of *vyavaharika satta*, or worldly existence. This is the world of experience. It is not a private illusion, like a mirage or a hallucination. The world of experience is a shared world which human beings can talk about in intelligible ways, and navigate effectively. We explore outer space, gather knowledge about the natural world, form social connections with specific people with unique names, get to know specific places, etc. We are not hallucinating this world, but constructing it according to shared intersubjective cognitive structures that allow us to smoothly communicate with other people.

In spite of the fact that worldly existence has an objective status as a world of experience we share with other humans, it is not the ultimate reality. So, though we acknowledge that having ones loved ones close is different from having them far away, in space and/or time, there is no ultimate difference. Even though we may not be able to speak to, touch, or even see our loved one, for various reasons, we both exist in the ultimate reality of Brahman. Just as Brahman can communicate with itself, we can also communicate with our separated or departed loved ones, since all of us, one self and one's loved ones, have an identity with the ultimate oneness of consciousness.