UNIT 1 ADVAITA VEDANTA

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1.0. OBJECTIVES

This unit is about Advaita Vedanta, its meaning and significance in Indian Philosophy. The word Advaita according to the dictionary is non-dualism, especially in relation to identifying Brahman with the Universal, or with Soul or the spirit and matter. It also means peerless and unique. Literal meaning of Vedanta is the end of Veda. Upanishads came at the end of Veda, they are the Jnana Kandas. They teach knowledge of Brahman or the universal Spirit, who is described as both - Creator and Creation, Actor and Act, Existence, Knowledge, and Joy. Upanishad’s Major Teachings are – the Self exists, it is immortal without a beginning or an end, essentially non – material, and the self is identical with Brahman, the highest Reality, and the Absolute.

The main feature of Advaita Vedanta is to understand Brahman, the Supreme Soul. To understand Brahman one has to attain knowledge, overcome ignorance, and be liberated and be in vigilant state at the conscious level. Advaita Vedanta teaches three stages of truth. The first stage is the transcendental or Paramarthika in which Brahman is the only reality and nothing else. The second stage is the pragmatic or Vyavaharika in which both *Jiva* (living creatures and individual souls) and God are true, and the material world is also true. The third and the last stage is the apparent or Pratibhasika in which material world reality is actually false, like mistaking a rope for a snake. To comprehend the essence of Advaita philosophy one has to understand these topics: Brahman and Atman, *Avidya* and *Maya* (Ignorance and illusion), *Karya* and *karana* (effect and cause), Knowledge, Attaining Liberation through Knowledge.
1.1 INTRODUCTION

Around 7th century Gaudapada, the author of Mandukya Karika, a commentary on Mandukya Upanishad discussed that there was no duality, awake or dream, the mind moves through illusion (Maya) and only nonduality (Advaita) is the final truth. The truth is difficult to know because of ignorance or illusion. There is no becoming of the thing by itself or from some other thing. There is only Atman, ‘all – soul’, there is no individual soul. An individual soul is temporarily delineated, as the space that a jar contains is delineated from the main space; once the jar is broken the space within the jar merges with the vast space.

Sankara built further on Gaudapada’s foundation and gave more strength to the Adavita Vedanta. His three major commentaries are on Brahma sutras, Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita. Sankara while propounding his philosophy does not start from the empirical world with logical analysis but, rather, directly from the Absolute, Brahman. Sankara’s metaphysics stands on the criterion that the Real is that whose negation is impossible. Building his argument that the Upanishads teach the nature of Brahman, he develops a complete epistemology to account for the human error in taking the world as real. He justifies that Brahman is outside time, space, and causality, which are simply forms of empirical experience; no distinction in Brahman or from Brahman is possible.

Sankara strongly supporting that the world is not real but illusion, logically analyses his statement:

1. Whatever remains eternal is true, and whatsoever is destroyed is non–eternal and is untrue. As the world is created and destroyed, it is not real.
2. Truth is unchanging. Since the world is changing, it is not real.
3. Things that are independent of time and space are real, and whatever is in space and time is unreal.
4. Just as one sees the dream in sleep, one sees a kind of dream even when one is awake. The world is compared to this conscious dream.
5. The world is superimposition of Brahman. Superimposition cannot be real.

1.2 BRAHMAN AND ATMAN

According to dictionary meaning, Brahman is sacred learning, a divine source. Brahman is considered as the Supreme, all-pervading spirit and the Soul of the Universe, the divine essence and source of all being from which all created things emanate and to which they return. Brahman as supreme Spirit is not an object of worship in the usual sense of the term, but Brahman is meditated upon by the devout with profound veneration. Mandana Misra accepting Bhartrhari’s thesis says that Brahman is language (Sabadvaita). Brahman is consciousness, and
consciousness is the power of speech, so Brahman is speech of the whole Universe manifestation of Vivarta (speech). Brahman was the center theme in Upanishads, Jnana Kanda. In Chandogya Upanishad, Tat tvam asi, (that thou art), Jiva is identified with Brahman. Brahman and the Self are the one and the same. According to Advaita there is no duality; One and many, infinite and finite, the subject and the object etc. are the limitation of consciousness that cannot comprehend the Brahman due to ignorance or Avidya. There is no language to describe Brahman; it is like ‘neti, neti’, ‘not this, not this.’ Understanding Brahman is beyond the senses; He is the purest Knowledge and illuminates like the source of light.

Brahman is self-existent, He is described as ‘Sachidananda’ – meaning Sat infinite truth, cit infinite Consciousness, ananda infinite Bliss. Sankara sketches Him as “Satyam Jnanam anantam brahma” (Taitiriya Up. II.1), Brahman is the Truth, Knowledge and Endless. Brahman is free from any kind of differences or differentiation. Brahman is neither Sajatiya (homogeneous) because there is no second to Him nor Vijatiya (heterogeneous) because none other than Him exist; Ekamevadviśtiyam, it is one without a second (Chandogya Upanishad). Advaita philosophy is built on the strong hold of Upanishads and Brahmasutra. Upanishads give various incidences where it is highlighted that Brahman = Atman; Prajanam brahma, consciousness is Brahman (Aitareya Upanishad), Aham bramasmi, I am Brahman (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Ayamatma brahma, this Atman is Brahman (Mandukya Upanishad). Brahmasutra starts with “athato brahma jignasa” (chapter 1 Samanvaya: harmony 1.1). Taking these as examples, the philosophy puts forth the unique theory that Brahman is the One, the Whole and only reality. Other than Brahman everything else, including the Universe, material objects and individual are false. Brahman is infinite, omnipresent, omnipotent, incorporeal, impersonal transcendent reality; that is the divine ground for all Being. There is no separation or distinction between Brahman and others in the Universe. That is how when one achieves the turiya state, one experiences that one’s soul becomes one with everything else.

**Atman:** Atman exactly means breath but according to some it is connected with aham (I) and according to others contrast of avatman. From Vedic period Atman is interpreted as breath, soul, the principle of life and sensation. After the Vedic period, in Indian philosophy, Atman is described as the eternal core of the personality which survives after death and transmigrates to a new life or is released from the bond of existence. Upanishads define Atman as part of the universal Brahman, with which it can commune or even fuse. So Atman is deemed to be the central circle identified with Brahma. Advaita Vedanta understands Atman not as a part of Brahman that ultimately dissolves into Brahman, but as the whole of Brahman itself. One has to understand how the individual soul, which is limited and one in each body can be same as Brahman. The philosophy argues that Self is not an individual concept, Atman is only one and unique. It is like the same moon that appears as several moons on its reflections on the surface of the water covered with bubbles; Atman appears as different Atman in different bodies.

Atman is the silent witness of all the life happening and free from and beyond sin and merit. It is incorporeal and independent. When the reflection of Atman leads to avidya (ignorance), Atman becomes jiva – a living being with a body and senses. Each jiva feels that he has his own, unique and distinct Atman called jivatman. The concept of jiva is true in pragmatic level. In the
transcendental level, the *Atman* is equal to Brahman. The Advaita Vedanta explains the relative and the unreal nature of the objective world; it propounds the Advaita (one without a second) and states three levels of experience of the *Atman*—waking (*vaishvanara*), dreaming (*taijasa*) and deep sleep (*prajna*).

### 1.3 AVIDYA AND MAYA

Sankara distinguishes Brahman as Higher Brahman and Lower Brahman in his major Commentaries. According to him the Higher Brahman is understood only by knowledge (*Vidya*), He is free from attachment, names and forms; He is *Nirguna Brahman*; this understanding brings about Liberation. *Saguna* Brahman or God according to Sankara is Lower Brahman; he says that this Brahman is viewed from the aspects of ignorance (*Avidya*). Arguing further, Sankara asks when The Higher Brahman is the Absolute where is the cause for the distinction? He further says that The Lower Brahman is the cause of diversity. The entire Advaita philosophy concentrates on how one can understand Brahman. Philosophers discuss the hurdles that are faced while understanding Brahman. The main characteristic to understand Brahman is *Vidya* (Knowledge). Knowledge is possible only when the mind is cleared from doubts and apprehensions. As long as there is no transparency learning becomes ignorance (*avidya*). Gaudapada calls ignorance as *vikalpa* (wrong interpretation) and Sankara calls it as *adhyasa* (superimposition).

Samkhya gives an example for cause and effect; the pot is a transformation of the clay; it is and real. But Advaita philosophy says that except Brahman the rest of the thing is only an appearance, because of *Avidya*. Even the pot and clay, effect and cause become ‘unreal’ at ‘Higher Standpoint’ (*Paramarthika*) but ‘real’ at empirical standpoint (*vyavaharica*). Gaudapada says that people fail to understand at the ‘higher point of view” because of wrong interpretation. He gives another example how things are seen differently; One sees a rope at dusk and thinks it as a snake, due to the wrong interpretation of the senses. Sankara calls this wrong interpretation ‘superimposition’ (*adhyasa*). He defines it as “the appearance, in the form of a memory, of something personally experienced in some other place.” Unless one has the idea of or seen a snake, it is not possible to mistake a rope for a snake. Similarly it is natural tendency to superimpose the qualities of the object on its subject and vice versa. Karl H. Potter writes, “…. We identify our self quo seat of consciousness with our self quo body, mind, memory etc. all of which are objects, not subjects, and so have at least one property that the self quo subject cannot have.” Sankara identifies such superimposition with the result of *avidya* (ignorance). The only way to overcome ignorance is to thrive by *Vidya* (knowledge).

**Maya**

There are references to the use of the word ‘*Maya*’ in the Rig Veda and in a few Upanishads as ‘mysteries’. Even Advaita Vedanta uses the same meaning in its interpretation of the word ‘*Maya*’. Gaudapada uses *Maya* in different occasions not only to mean the power of apparently creating things but also to speak of the things so created. This kind of usage is found in Buddhism. In this respect Gaudapada is influenced by Buddhism. He does not identify *Maya*
with avidya but Sankara does. Sankara uses the term avidya to speak of that which creates the world of Maya or name and form, but does not refer to the world itself as avidya. Joshi has pointed out that Sankara is not consistent in this respect. But it is indicated, Sankara uses avidya while discussing superimposition and Maya while mentioning prakruti or namarupa. Karl Potter writes, “Sankara makes it known that superimposition does not need a cause as it is beginning less. Avidya is for the empirical objects in the world but for the false awareness of those objects.”

A few scholars question the identical use of avidya and Maya; they argue, if ignorance is of jiva, then it belongs to Brahman. Maya is God’s power to produce the world as illusion. The main concept of Advaita Vedanta is that there is no individual self or jivas and everything is Brahman. If such is the case then ignorance is of Brahman. The question arises “What is avidya?” Mandana Mishra says that ignorance is anirvachaniya (as neither real nor unreal). Sureshwara points out that avidya is unreal, so, it does not affect Brahma. However the jiva takes avidya for real, so it is jiva which is ignorant. Even though Sankara does not have definite terminology to distinguish between avidya and Maya, he stresses, “Avidya and Maya are causing us to experience (superimposition) the thing that we do, which is to give it a positive function beyond that of merely veiling Brahman.” Maya has a complex illusory power of Brahman which causes the Brahman to be seen as the material world of separate forms. Maya has two functions; one is to ‘hide’ Brahman from ordinary human perception, and the other is to present the material world in its (Brahman) place, Maya is also said to be indescribable, though it may be said that sense data entering ones awareness via the five senses are Maya, since the fundamental reality underlying sensory perception is completely hidden. The credibility of Maya being real or unreal is not for sure. But Brahman is not touched by Maya. It is like the magician who is not affected by his own tricks.

Both avidya and Maya are temporary. An action is not necessary to overcome avidya. It is naturally removed by its opposite Vidya (knowledge). Knowing needs intention and depends on the agent. For example to milk a cow, what is needed is a cow and the cognition of milking. Whereas, if one has a false understanding, mistake can be rectified by correct information; a false understanding of a rope as a snake is removed when one receives the information that it is rope. Knowledge is gained by personal perseverance to know the Truth. The truth is realized at two levels, one is to study the great Scripture with the guidance of a Teacher (guru) and the second level is to examine one’s ‘miss’ interpretation of things and situation. The self examination starts with the questioning of one’s own understanding of the present and the previous experiences; one has to examine the reasons for the false interpretation and realize the ‘higher’ knowledge governed by nothing but the truth: how is that the snake is superimposed on a rope? Is it due to fear of the snake or the failure of the senses to recognize correctly? Are rope and snake two different objects? If they are two distinct objects then why one is superimposed on the other? Clarity in understanding brings about Truth. The truth is the knowledge.

Check your progress 1

Note: Use the space provided below for your answers.
1. How does Upanishad characterize Brahma?

2. What is Avidya according to Advaita Vedanta?

### 1.4 KARYA AND KARANA (EFFECT AND CAUSE)

Gaudapada justifies that an object which is not existing at the beginning can exist in the end or in the middle, that is to say an object is not completely nonexistent. He gives an example of a dream. When one dreams, he knows that it does not exist. In sleep, the dream originates, exists for some time; once the sleeper wakes up the dream ceases to exist. Gaudapada says even the objects one sees in wakeful state are unreal as they originate like in dream. He divides objects into two groups—Real (sat) and unreal (asat). Unreal objects are born and seen to be real. Discussing the relation of cause and effect, he says that both cause and effects are unreal under four possibilities:

1. If the effect is different from the cause, then it is not real
2. If the cause is unreal and becomes real in effect it will be absurd like like son of a barren woman.
3. The cause is real and the effect is not.
4. The last one is, both cause and effect are unreal, in which case nothing ever comes to existence or goes out of existence.

He says that whatever originates has to end, like Samsara, emotions etc. Nothing can stay forever. Sankara’s argument about cause and effect is that when one’s understanding of a thing called A, depends on the persistence of another thing B and it might be a possibility that A and B are similar in nature, but A might not be equal to B; in such a case, understanding of A does not depend upon understanding of B. For example, a horse can be perceived without the presence of a donkey. And it is further put forth that an agent (karta) is necessary for a cause (karana) and effect (karya). To make a pot, clay is the cause, the pot is an effect, the person who does the pot is the agent, karta, as he is the one who gives shape to the pot. Without the agent the effect will not come into existence. Sankara says, “The only thing that one properly functions as agent is the effect itself.” He further states that cause has a pre existence of the effect before it is manifested.
Causality involves relationship between the agent with the nature and the effect with the nature. Agent brings about effect manifestation to our experience. The effect pot is made out of clay. The effect is thus identical in substance with its cause, pre-existent in it is the potency, and this is sakaryavada. This causation is called as parinamavada and vivartavada. Samkhya system adopts parinamavada; it says that pot is a transformation of the clay, the cause and effect exist at the appointed time and it is not ‘unreal’. But vivartanavada argues that the pot is an object but an appearance is a work of imagination conditioned by ignorance (avidya). Advaita hails vivartanavada rather than parinamavada model. The reality of the cause is in reality only relative of the effect, with the pot the clay is ‘real’. But Sankara says even the clay is not ultimately real. The ultimate reality brings about only Brahma and all the others are considered as Avidya. Further discussing the cause and effect, Advaita Vedanta says that Karya (effect) is non–different from the Karana (cause). Nevertheless Karana is different from Karya. This principle is called Karya – Karana ananyatva (non – difference of the effect from the cause).

It is said - if the cause is destroyed, the effect will no longer exist. For example, in the cotton cloth, if thread is removed, then there will not be cloth, the cloth is destroyed. Similarly, the effect thread, the cause, cotton is removed then there will not be any thread. Sankara taking Brahma sutra 2.1.9 “Ananyatva Karyakaranayoh karyasya karanaatmatvam na tu karanasta kartaymatvam - despite the non–difference of cause and effect, the effect has its self in the cause but not the cause in the effect. The effect is of the nature of the cause and not the cause the nature of the effect. Therefore the qualities of the effect cannot touch the cause. At the time of the existence, one can easily grasp that the effect is not different from the cause. But the cause is different from the effect is not readily understood. As to this, it is not easy to separate cause and effect. But it is possible by imagination. For example, the reflection of the moon in the mirror, only the form of the moon is seen but it is not the moon itself as it (the reflection) has no moon in it. In Chandogya Upanishad it is said – Sarvam ca namarupadi sadatmanaiva atyam vikarajatam svatastu anrtameva – all names and forms are real when seen with the Sat (Brahman) but are false when seen independent of Brahman. Karya is not different from the karana, nonetheless karana is different from karya. Jagat (the world) is not different from Brahma; on the other hand Brahman is different from the jagat.

1.5. KNOWLEDGE

True Knowledge is attained by eagerness to learn. The ambition to know the ultimate ‘Truth’ leads to wisdom. When snake is superimposed on the rope, correct information that it is only a rope not a snake must be clarified. The person who has mistaken the rope for a snake must understand the object rope as the existing thing and snake as an illusion. Before deciding to perceive an object right or wrong one has to know how the things are perceived in the first place.

Advaita philosophy states that there are six different ways of learning –

- **Pratyaksha** – the knowledge gained by the senses
- **Anumana** – the knowledge gained by inference
- **Upamana** – the knowledge gained by analogy
- **Sabda or agama** – knowledge gained by testimony
• **Arthapatti** – the knowledge gained by superimposing the known knowledge on an appearing knowledge that does not occur with the known knowledge.

• **Anupalabdhi** – the knowledge gained by negation

Among all these the importance is given to verbal testimony (sabda or agama).

To acquire knowledge pramātra (the subject), the knower of the knowledge, pramāna (the cause or the means) of knowledge and the prameya (the object) of knowledge are very essential. Knowledge is achieved by mediate or immediate, the difference is that while in the first, only ‘that’ of the object is known, in the second, ‘what’ is also understood. Both are alike vṛtti (behaviour) of the internal organ in which the sakshin (what is present) is imminent. In some cases to obtain knowledge, it does not involve sensory perception. The empirical self is understood immediately but it is not presented to any senses. So, the word ‘pratyaksa’ (present to the sense) is replaced with ‘aparoksa’ (not immediate). Knowledge is immediate whether it is by the senses or not. The object must be such that one can comprehend directly (yogya). For example, a chair is understood by looking at it but not kindness. Other condition is that the object must be present at the time. Finally there must be an intimate relationship between the subject and the object in question. For the external object the vṛtti flows out to understand where as internal, it originates inside; like understanding happiness or sorrow.

Accomplishment of knowledge happens when subject and object come together and by hypothesis they are removed from each other and occupy a different place in space; the vṛtti relates these two and brings about for the time being identical ground for the two. Describing how the understanding takes place M. Hiriyanna writes, “When an organ is brought in contact with an object, the antahkarana, like a search light as it were, goes out towards it and gets itself determined by it or assumes the ‘form’ of the object. The existence of knowledge is thus necessary so that psychologically, the theory is realistic. When the vṛtti coincides with the object the perceptual knowledge arises.” Vṛtti is internal so it coincides with jīva. This brings about the connection between the knower and the known. As these stages of knowing are internal, M. Hiriyanna says that the object is ‘felt’ rather known. The same thing happens to the internal also like happiness and sorrow, the condition is that at the time of knowing it must be present. In some situation like religious merits ‘punya’ and demerits ‘papa’ the antahkarana cannot understand because of the lack of condition ‘yogatva’ or ‘feltness’. They are understood by verbal testimony. Going back to the mistaking rope for a snake, the antahkarana understand the object by arthapatti. This wrong understanding can be rectified if the subject is made to realize by sabda. Once anumana is cleared then it makes way to the True Knowledge.

## 1.6 Attaining Liberation Through Knowledge

Almost all Indian philosophical systems give importance to ‘Liberation’ and looks at it as the main aim of the mankind and Advaita is no exception. Advaita Vedanta looks at Liberation as Being, Knowing and Experiencing one’s True Self. Pure knowledge is not under other’s control nor is it under any control, it is something one has. All it needs is a quest to know the Truth and Reality, once one has the thrust to know immediately the pure knowledge surfaces to
understanding. According to Sankara there are four outstanding characteristic of a person who is in quest of the Pure Knowledge. He is able to distinguish between what is eternal and what is not. He will be non attached to present and future actions. He acquires moral virtues like tranquility, restraint etc. He desires liberation, Advaita says that liberation is free from differentiation and identifies only with ‘True Self’, which is without beginning and end and without any change of any sort. Sankara disputes the idea of the Mimamsas that Liberation is a result of action. Firstly, he says that liberation is identical with ‘True Self; the true self does not have a commencement or finish, whereas the result of an action, has a starting and comes to existence when an act is performed. So, the Liberation cannot be the result of an action. Secondly, there are four kinds of actions – Utpatti, (the origination), for example, a potter making a pot; Apati, (the attainment) of a state, like arriving at a place; Samskara (the purification), performing rituals; Vikara (the modification), change taking place like milk turning to curds.

To attain Liberation these actions are not necessary. The only entity of Liberation is to cognize Brahman, this is the heart of Advaita epistemology and philosophy of language. Liberation is not a product. Liberation does not change a person; the liberated need not have to become someone or something else. Liberation is not to reach a place (heaven) as a result of an action. The liberated will not die and be born again. Gaudapada says, “There is no liberation.” Liberation is similar to the difference in light reflections from a stained mirror to a spotless mirror. Sankara propounds that liberation is not a future state or goal, but it exists in the present, past and the future without any time bound. The Self realization brings about the awareness that Brahman is pure consciousness (Cit), awareness (Jnana) and witness (saksin), Brahman is self luminous, by His light everything shines out. While such an understanding is reached then the relationship between knower and the known merges. There will be no subject and object relationship. Sankara is of the opinion that even the state of Bliss (ananda) is not cognized or experienced by the Liberated Soul.

Gaudapada in his work Mandukya Katika, book 3, commenting on non duality (Karika 37 – 48) states that Liberation is, “Rather the awareness (of the mind), Samadhi (concentration), which is beyond language and thought, very calm and unwavering, full of light and without fear. Since there are no thoughts about objects, the awareness rests in itself and attains equanimity.” He further argues that it is not easy to reach this state because we are grounded by fear. This is difficult even for the Yogis. When one reaches this state, one is free from all pain or pleasure because there will be no distinction or awareness of the emotional attachment due to physical senses. The mind will be immersed in the divine light of understanding the Absolute. There is oneness with the whole of the Universe. The liberated man functions like a burnt seed, he will be inactive. It is like liberation in living, the behaviour is to live his life to complete his present life’s Prarabdha karma.

Check your progress II
Note: Use the space provided below for your answers.
1. “Jagat (the world) is not different from Brahman; on the other hand Brahman is different from the jagat.” – justify this statement.

2. What is ‘superimposition’, according to Sankara?

3. Will Liberation change a person?

1.7 LET US SUM UP

It is through pure consciousness (vijnana) one understands the ‘Truth’. Thrust for the ‘Truth’ does not have a beginning or end. It is always present inside, only one needs to recognize it. When one understands the greatest truth of the Absolute, Brahman that the effect of the world is illuminating like a source of infinite light then he is liberated from the ignorance (Avidya) and released from illusion (Maya). It is said, “The manifold universe is, in truth, a single Reality. There is only one Great Being, which the sages call Brahman, in which all countless forms of existence reside. That Great Being is utter consciousness, and it is the very essence, or self (Atman) of all being.” Advaita upholds that a person can be liberated while still living in the body. The identification of the Self with the Highest Self is the liberation. According to Advaita, “There is neither dissolution nor creation, neither a person in bondage nor any spiritual aspirant neither any seeker after liberation nor one that is liberated this realization is the highest truth.” The ethics of the Advaita philosophy stress that the liberated understands the Absolute, Brahman and lead a life and do what they have to do in their life time like a dew drop on a leaf to merge in the sunlight.

1.8. KEY WORDS

Consciousness: awareness (in philosophy) the power of the mind, whether rational or not, to be aware of acts, sensations or emotions

Manifestation: that act or process of showing, making manifest

Perception: the act of perceiving, understanding that is the result of perceiving
Prajnanam Brahma: Consciousness is Brahman (Aitareya Upanishad, Rig Veda)

Aham Brahmasmi: I am Brahman (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Yajur Veda)

Tat tvam asi: That thou art (Chandogya Upanishad, Sama Veda)

Ayamatma Brahna: This Atman is Brahman (Mandukya Upanishad, Atharva Veda)

Athato Brahma jignasa: now therefore the inquiry into the nature of Brahman (Brahmasutra, Chapter one Samanvaya: harmony, 1. 1. 1.)

1.9 FURTHER READING REFERENCES


