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The Concept of ‘Advaita Vedanta’ and the Philosophical Discourses of Eminent Indian Sages

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Abstract

Advaita Vedanta is an Indian religious philosophy which connotes the concept of non-dualism of God. In this paper an attempt is made regarding Advaita Vedanta extracting the teachings and discourse of the great Indian sages and saints. Though Adi Sankaracharya was the first person to consolidate the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, a little effort has been made here to collect the philosophical contributions made by other eminent saints regarding Advaita Vedanta excluding him.

Advaita Vedanta

Advaita is considered to be the most influential and most dominant sub-school of Vedanta, one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy. The first person to explicitly consolidate the principles of *Advaita* was Adi Shankaracharya [788-820] in the 8th century, while the first historical proponent was Gaudapada [grand Guru of Shankara]. In the 8th century, Gaudapada wrote the earliest available systematic treatise on *Advaita*, entitled *Mandukya Karika* or *Gaudapada Karika*.

The central teaching in *Advaita* is that there is no duality; the mind, awake or dreaming, moves through illusion. Ignorance conceals the Truth that there is no becoming and no individual being, only a temporary delineation from one’s real Self [Atman] or real ‘I’. Contrary to perceptible experience, the Self is not an experience of individuality but a non-personal, all-inclusive awareness which is beyond knowledge. It is eternally present and one is only consciously aware of it as it really is when the self-limiting tendencies of the mind have ceased. Its nature is non-dual, one without a second, and is no different from Reality, the Absolute substratum of all that exists. The word ‘*Advaita*’ essentially refers to the Absolute Unity of the Self and the Reality.

Self-realisation is of the nature of direct experience transcending all perceptions and notions, and will not be gained unless the belief that the world is real ceases. There is complete absence of the delusion of duality, which manifests as the notions of an ego, a mind, a body and an objective world. False notions alone constitute the illusion. If your assumption is that you are the Self, then thinking is not a problem, it can come and go as it pleases. However, if you think you are the body, then thinking is the only being, the only thing that keeps you away from the brink of the “terrible abyss” of non-being. When the sense of being an individual is transcended, you will know that you are the Self and that your true nature is Being-consciousness-bliss. Being abides in itself, consciousness knows itself and bliss reposes in itself. The Self alone is.

The aspirant must be endowed with an intense desire for liberation. Having discerned what is Eternal and the Source of happiness, he should be non-attached to all that is transitory, all that is mutable, all that is mere, fleeting phenomenal appearance, all that depends upon the senses, all that

depends on the mind, and all that depends on the individual self in order to be experienced. The aspirant should be endowed with the power of discrimination and should embrace the enquiry into the real nature of the Self. He should discriminate between the Real and the unreal so that he realises the Real ever is and the unreal never came to be. He should regard all that is transitory, changeful, objective, composed as parts, sporadic, or dependent as unreal. He should realise that that which is Eternal, unchanging, non-objective, indivisible and partless, continuous and non-dependent is the ever-existent Reality. Just as a river does not continue to flow after its discharge into the ocean, so also a person loses all movements after he merges in the Self. Abandoning the notions of the external, which give rise to the appearance of the world, and the notions of the internal, which give rise to the delusions of a mind and an individual, the aspirant should have full faith in the sacred knowledge of *Advaita Vedanta*. True knowledge consists in possessing an eye of equality for all. Which is seen with the eyes and that which is beyond the eyes are both the same and not different. The creator and the creation are not two. The creator has not created creation, but has manifested or transformed himself into creation. The whole being of a man should be surrendered to the Lord [Reality] without reservation. Then there will be a marvellous transformation. He will have the vision of God everywhere. All sorrows and pains will vanish. His mind will be one with Him. He will forever have his life and being in the Lord alone. The devotees who have dedicated themselves to the Lord, who are ever harmonious and Self-abiding, who adore Him with intense love, who are ever devout, obtain the divine Grace.

However, there were many Indian saints and sages, apart from Adi Shankaracharya, who had their precious opinions regarding the concept of *Advaita Vedeanta* which is briefed below.

Tukaram

Tukaram was born in the year 1598 in the small village of Dehu in the West Indian state of Maharashtra to Bolhoba and Kanakai a couple belonging to the lower Sudra class¹. Tukaram was a 17th-century poet-saint of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra². Early 20th-century scholars on Tukaram considered his teachings to be Vedanta-based but lacking a systematic theme. Late 20th-century scholarship of Tukaram, and translations of his *Abhanga* poem, affirm his pantheistic Vedantic view³. Tukaram's *Abhanga* 2877, as translated by Ranade states, for example, "The Vedanta has said that the whole universe is filled by God. All sciences have proclaimed that God has filled the whole world. The Puranas have unmistakably taught the universal immanence of God. The saints have told us that the world is filled by God. Tuka indeed is playing in the world uncontaminated by it like the Sun which stands absolutely transcendent". The findings of Tukaram are as:

Of what material is the 'I' made; how difficult it is to look into its nature. We cannot forget the idea, though it is nothing but ourself. When darkness overpowers light, the ground under our feet is changed. Tukaram says, "If you take God with you, he will show you where you are".

The mind serves as a crucible wherein all pleasures are thrown together. One serves to make another deeper, but each returns at last to its native form. When a drop of rain falls into the sea, how can it be distinguished? Tukaram says, "The new drops cannot be recognised even by God".

I have renounced all vehicles of sense; I shall not allow any trouble to come near me hereafter. Why should we have to clean our hands? Why should we put obstacles in a practised path? What has God not created for you? Everything is in its proper place. Tukaram says, "When our pride disappears, with it goes the relation of I and you".

He knows not what is right; he is dragged along by the organs of sense; he continues prating in the words which he has learned. Such a one goes to hell himself and would take forty-two families and the world besides with him. He shuts his eyes and utters things unfit for speech; he talks idle nonsense to gratify his pride. Tukaram says, "I have scrutinised him; I know him for one who dances in imitation of others".

If a man talks of Divine knowledge, while his heart is full of pride in wealth, what pleasure does it yield the Soul to serve Him? Many in this Kali age have turned saints to full their bellies. "Rare indeed", says Tukaram, "is the man whom I fall down".

Ramakrishna

Ramakrishna was born on 18 February 1836, in the village of Kamarpukur, in the Hooghly district of West Bengal, into a very poor, pious, and orthodox brahmin family. In the middle of the 19th century, India was torn by conflicts of creeds, cultures, dogmas, doctrines, theologies and philosophies and Shree Ramakrishna brought back the Hindu Spirituality in the core of the Society and thus begun the renaissance of Bengal vis-a-vis India. The findings of Ramakrishna are as follow:

The mind steeped in affection for woman and wealth is like the green betel-nut. So long as the nut is green, it remains adherent to its shell, but when it dries, shell and nut become separated; and on being shaken, the kernel moves within. So when affection for women and wealth dries up from within, the Soul is perceived as quite different from the body.

The knowledge of Oneness makes me see that everything is but a manifestation of God, the Absolute, on the plane of sense. Thus do I realise that all women are so many forms in which the divine Mother appears. Hence I revere all women alike— be it an unchaste woman, or an ideal wife who is an example to others of conjugal love and devotion.

Unless one becomes as simple as a child, one cannot reach divine illumination. Give up your vanity about the worldly knowledge you have acquired, and know it to be futile in the realm of higher Truth. Be as simple as a child, and then only you will reach the knowledge of the true.

Only two kinds of people can attain to Self-knowledge: those whose minds are not encumbered at all with learning, that is to say, not overcrowded with thoughts borrowed from others; and those who after studying all the scriptures and sciences, have come to realise that they know nothing.

Jnana never comes without the renunciation of lust and possession. With renunciation is destroyed all ignorance. Many things can be burnt by means of a lens held directly in the rays of the sun. But you cannot use it in the shadow of a room. Even so with the mind. You must take it out of the dark cell of this world and expose it to the full blaze of self-effulgent Divinity. Then alone will come true renunciation, and all ignorance will be destroyed.

Kabir

The early life of Kabir including his year of birth and death are unclear. Kabir's literature legacy was championed by two of his disciples, Bhagodas and Dharmadas. The extracts of Kabir from his version on *Advaita Vedanta* are as follow:

The mind is a nervous thief, the mind is a pure cheat.

The ruin of sages, men and gods, the mind has a hundred thousand gates.

Try your best with jewels, decorate the clay.

Kabir came and went again, Existence is a lie.

What's the world like? A flock of sheep.

One falls in the ditch, the rest jump in.

Sage Yajnavalkya

Yagyavalkya of Videha (7th century BCE)⁴ was a sage and philosopher of Vedic India. He was one of the first philosophers in recorded history, alongside Uddalaka Aruni.^[4] In the court of King Janaka of Mithila, he was renowned for his expertise in Vedic ritual and his unrivaled talent in theological debate. He expounded a doctrine of *neti neti* to describe the universal Self or Atman. He later became a wandering ascetic. His philosophical values is as:

Where the duality is present, there one can smell the fragrance, one can speak to others, one can listen to others, one will pay respect to others, and one can think and understand. But, where there is only Atman everywhere, what will he smell? Whom will he ask? What will he listen to? Whom will he pay respect to? What will he think about and understand?

Yoga Vasistha

Yoga Vasistha is a Hindu text written by Bhagwan Valmiki. Narrated to Prince Rama, its teachings are associated with *Advaita Vedanta* and Yoga, and explain the illusory nature of the manifest world and the principle of non-duality. The gist of non-duality i.e., *Advaita Vedanta* is described as follow:

Mind constantly swings like a pendulum between the Reality and the appearance, between consciousness and inertness. When the mind contemplates the inert objects for a considerable time, it assumes the characteristic of such inertness. When the same mind is devoted to enquiry and wisdom, it shakes off all conditioning and returns to its original nature as pure consciousness. Mind takes the very form of that which one contemplates, whether it is natural or cultivated. Therefore, resolutely but intelligently contemplate the state beyond sorrow, free from all doubts. The mind is capable of restraining itself; there is indeed no other way.

It is childish and ignorant to talk of duality and non-duality; the enlightened ones laugh at all this. However, without such a discussion based on duality and non-duality it is not possible to clean one's consciousness of ignorance. It is only in that spirit that I have dealt with all this, dear friend.

The mind abandons everything when the vision of the Supreme is gained. Hence, one should resolutely renounce everything till the Supreme vision is gained. Not till one renounces everything is Self-knowledge gained: when all points of view are abandoned, what remains is the Self.

That which has no seed [cause] and which is indescribable is therefore not the cause of another—naught is born of that. Hence the Self is neither the doer nor the action nor the instrument. It is the Truth. It is the Eternal Absolute consciousness. It is Self-knowledge. There is no creation in the Supreme Reality. One may theoretically establish the arising and the existence of a wave in the ocean on the basis of time of its arising and space in which it seems to exist as a wave; but who has tried to establish such a relationship between Reality and the creation? For in reality, time and space do not exist. Thus, the world has no basis at all.

It is the cessation of the awareness of action and of experience, the giving up of conditioning and thus the attainment of peace and the state of equilibrium that is known by the expression “abandonment of action”.

The Infinite consciousness which alone appears as all this is undying, unchanging and Eternal. The unmoving consciousness remains, appearing to be whatever notion arises in it here and there. What is true and what is false? So let one experience bodies, actions, sorrow or pleasure as and when they arise – or let them all go. There is no meaning in all this. Let it be 'this' way or 'that' way, let it be or not – give up this delusion and remain enlightened.

What is enquiry? To enquire thus: "Who am I? How has this evil of repetitive history [samsara] come into being?" is true enquiry. Knowledge of Truth arises in oneself; and from such knowledge there follows tranquillity in oneself; and then there arises the Supreme peace that pass the understanding and the ending of all sorrow. Enquiry is not reasoning or analysis; it is directly looking into oneself.

Diversity has no real existence except in one's own imagination. "All this is indeed the Absolute Reality"– remain established in this Truth. Give up all other notions. Even as the waves are non-different from the ocean, all these things are non-different from Reality. Even as in the seed is hidden the entire tree in potential, in reality there exists the entire universe forever. Even as the multicoloured rainbow is produced by sunlight, all this diversity is seen in the one.

The universe is but a long dream. The ego-sense and also the fancy that there are others, are as real as dream-objects.

When the 'I' concept perishes, the body-sense will necessarily perish like a great tree whose roots are sawn off.

Through divine grace, one can go beyond the influences of past actions.

Desires arising from latent tendencies connected with external objects constitute bondage. One who has got rid of his latent tendencies along with their root cause and attained equanimity, O Raghava, know him to be a person liberated from the objects of perception.

Reality, or the Supreme Self, is one without a second, without a cause and without an effect, for it has no reason to do anything. It is therefore not the doer, neither is there any action, instrument nor seed for such activity. Hence it is not the cause for this creation or the creator.

He who has no likes or dislikes towards pleasant and unpleasant objects, but goes about like one asleep, is said to be a liberated person. Everything is consciousness. Nothing exists that is separate from consciousness.

¹ SG Tulpule (1992), *Devotional Literature in South Asia* (Editor: RS McGregor), Cambridge University Press, ISBN 978-0521413114, page 148.

² Mohan Lal (1993), *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature: Sasay to Zorgot*, Sahitya Akademi, South Asia Books, ISBN 978-9993154228, pages 4403-4404 .

³ RD Ranade (1994), *Tukaram*, State University of New York Press, ISBN 978-0791420928, pages 192-197.

⁴ H. C. Raychaudhuri (1972), *Political History of Ancient India*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, pp.41-52.