



Advaita and Advaya

An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thoughts

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Preamble

Ancient spiritual teachings of the East provide us with profound, universal, and timeless insights and realizations that benefit us in our unending search for deeper understanding of life, self, consciousness, and the universe. The universal themes of human life which those teachings addressed are still relevant today.

Study of ancient teachings that arose in different cultural milieus which were expressed in different languages and which were developed by mentalities very different from ours, poses a unique challenge. On the one hand, we need to study the original texts in the context of those different cultures, languages, and mentalities without projecting our present-day mentalities or cultural assumptions and concepts. On the other, we must understand the universal themes elucidated by them by transcending the difference in language and culture.

That is to say, we need to be transparadigmatic and to ontologically immerse ourselves in the contexts as well as in the texts so that we can innerstand beyond understanding the teachings and philosophies. And yet, we also need to reevaluate and transvaluate them in the context and the mentality of today.

In the East there was no concept of philosophy as the “love of wisdom.” What we now call Eastern Philosophy was a way of self-realization and a perennial search for meaning. The similar but distinct notions of Advaita and Advaya illuminate this fundamental tenet of Eastern Philosophy and offer deep insights into the way of self-realization and the way of realizing the meaning of human life.

Language is a folk model of reality. What is important in this and in any other context is to understand, through the portal of language, the extra-linguistic and the supra-conceptual reality of which language is a model. To this extent and for this reason, it is critical to understand the meanings of key words as they appear in a text.

1. Advaita and Advaya

Part One

The extant Sanskrit texts show that the concept of *Advaita* was used and elucidated primarily in the Brahmanic writings, especially in Vedanta Philosophy, while the concept of *Advaya* was used and elucidated primarily in the Buddhist writings, especially in Yogācāra Philosophy. *Advaita* means “one-without-a-second,” while *Advaya* means “not-two.”

Some contemporary Sanskrit dictionaries define the meanings of these etymologically related terms to be the reverse: that is, *Advaita* means “not-two” and *Advaya* means “one or oneness” (with another etymologically-related term *Advitiya* meaning “without a second”).

Language is a living system and evolves and changes with time. Further, the meaning of a word is determined, to a significant extent, by the context in which it is used. A word has various possible meanings acquired through time but its particular meaning is indeterminate without a particular context in which it is to be used. That is, a particular meaning, out of many possible meanings, of a word becomes determined only when it has a particular context in which it is used.

Examinations of the original Sanskrit texts in which *Advaita* or *Advaya* was used, indicate that it is more accurate and appropriate to state that *Advaita* was used to mean “one-without-a-second” while *Advaya* was used to mean “not-two” for the following reason.

Advaita

The Vedanta Philosophy and the Brahmanic Philosophies in general in which *Advaita* was prominently used are more structure/being-oriented, while the Mahayana Buddhist Philosophies in which *Advaya* was prominently used are more process/becoming-oriented. The Brahmanic Philosophies are metaphysical, while the Buddhist Philosophies are phenomenological.

Also, the Vedantic Cosmology is hierarchical (a structure above a structure above a structure, and so on), while the Mahayana Buddhist Cosmology is holarchical (a whole within a whole within a whole, and so on) and advances the notions of complementarity and interdependence.

The Vedantic Brahman (Godhead) is uniquely monotheistic-pantheistic in that Brahman as the Absolute & the Transcendent is monotheistic and yet being omni-immanently in everything in existence it is pantheistic. It is in this monotheistic aspect that Brahman is *Advaita*, One-without-a-second.

Advaita Vedanta sees Reality or Universe structurally and hierarchically and assigns Brahman the nature of Absolute Oneness/Nonduality of Transcendent Reality. Brahman that is *Advaita* is thought to be the only true Reality that is. For this reason, *Advaita* has the character of One-without-a-second.

The concept of interdependence – of interdependent oneness of all existence – that appears in the Vedanta literature shows a clear influence of Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy, brilliantly incorporated into the whole philosophy and cosmology of Vedanta. However, the distinguishing feature of Advaita-Vedanta remains the Absolute Oneness-without-a-second that was assigned to Brahman, along with Atman’s ontological symmetry and equivalence with Brahman.

Advaya

The Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy sees Reality or Universe-as-a-whole in terms of evolutionary process and of complementarity or interdependence principles, and this process and complementarity-orientation became more pronounced as it was assimilated in Tibet as well as in China (and later Korea and Japan).

In fact, this process and complementarity orientation explains in part the reason that Buddhism spread, while other philosophies of Indian origin did not, to China where the principle of complementarity and the process-dynamics of *yin & yang* constituted the fundamental principle of Chinese Daoist cosmology and philosophy.

One of the central concepts in Buddhism is *Dharma*. *Dharma* is variously translated in different contexts as (1) the cosmic law; (2) the teaching of the Buddha; (3) ethical principles and norms of behavior; (4) manifestation of reality; (5) mental content or object of thought; (6) factors of existence that constitute the phenomenal world and the empirical personality, and so on.

Dharma etymologically means: (that which) holds (everything) and (that which everything) upholds. That is to say, there is nothing in and of Reality or Universe that is not of or not related to Dharma.

Dharma permeates the whole of Reality while Reality-as-experienced is a dynamic evolutionary process of complementarity and interdependence. The concept of *Advaya* as used by the Buddhists captures this evolutionary process-dynamics of complementarity and interdependence. Therefore, the ultimate and primary Reality that is held and upheld by and as *Dharma* is not one or nondual in the sense of absolute "one-without-a-second" but in the sense of "not-two."

Buddhism is nontheistic. That is, Buddhism does not deny the existence of God/Godhead or Brahman, as atheism does, but it holds that intellectual precision and integrity demands that one remains silent about that which is categorically beyond the realm of language, logic, and concept.

Advaita and *Advaya* are two distinct and yet complementary concepts of nonduality that shed brilliant and penetrating light upon and into the nature of Reality. In the 20th century, quantum physics introduced the notion of the wave-particle duality & complementarity existing in the subatomic world. We can state that *Advaita* represents a particle-structure view while *Advaya* represents a wave-process view of Reality.

2. The Modes of Knowing

The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) cogently argued that:

1. The pure reason with its conceptual faculty, acting by itself, cannot establish judgments of the actuality but only of the possibility of existence.
2. The predication of actual existence becomes possible by means of the empirical material given through sense perception.
3. With respect to metaphysical reality (*noumenon*) as opposed to physical reality (*phenomenon*), no predication of actual existence is possible, because human consciousness has no known faculty through which noumenal material is directly given.

4. This means, for instance, that our pure reason can establish the possibility of the existence of God but that we can never know the actual existence of God, because we have no cognitive faculty by way of which we can directly access a pure metaphysical being such as God.

According to Kant, the combination of the principles of pure reason and the materials given through the senses makes possible the unity of experience by which the raw immediacy of sensory perception can be incorporated into a totality that is organized under logically formulated generalized principles. This establishes a basis for confidence and validity of the theoretical determinations of physical science. Yet, Kant concluded that the same could not be said about the theoretical determinations of metaphysics.

However, throughout the history of philosophy, both Eastern and Western, there have been philosophers and seers who demonstrated and elucidated a different mode of knowing or a different faculty within consciousness that provides direct access to metaphysical reality through suprasensory perception. To his great credit, Kant never denied the possibility of the existence of such a faculty, which he termed “transcendental apperception.”

In various esoteric philosophic and religious traditions of the East and the West, it has been claimed that within the entire organization of human consciousness there is a mode that is neither conceptual nor perceptual but supraconceptual. The character of this mode is of the nature of immediate awareness of an ontological content, the immediacy of which is of a much higher order than that which is given through the senses. This mode is what Kant termed transcendental apperception.

This mode of consciousness, transcendental apperception and supraconceptual mentation, immediately bestows a transcendental value and consequently renders possible the predication of its actual existence in an ontological judgment without violating the fundamental epistemological principles that Kant laid out. This is a momentous insight pregnant with new possibilities for knowledge and self-realization.

The concepts of *Advaita* and *Advaya* can be understood only through this transcendental apperception, not through reason or rational-conceptual faculty of the human mind.

3. Philosophy as a Way of Self-Realization

There are three paths of knowledge: (1) the path of nature (science); (2) the path of culture (philosophy, history, literature, etc.); (3) the path of meditation. The body of knowledge that has been developed and expounded in the Eastern philosophical literature is largely the result of the path of meditation augmented by the path of culture.

Our consciousness in the normal mode of operation is externally directed. When we are conscious, we are always conscious of something which is an object or a content of our conscious awareness. This mode of consciousness is analogous to a light projector where the source of light projects light upon everything in the environment save itself.

Meditation is the movement of the light of awareness turning around and inward towards the source of light. In this process, the self comes to illumine itself, i.e., to know itself, without projecting or objectifying itself. This is what transcendental apperception is. Also, self-realization implies self-knowledge. The self-knowledge attained through the path of meditation, through the act of transcendental apperception, is the kind of knowledge in which the knower is the known is the knowing.

It is not the kind of self-knowledge you acquire through self-reflection, self-introspection, or self-analysis. In order to reflect, introspect, or analyze yourself, you must first objectify and observe aspects of yourself. The observer, the subject-self, is always hidden from the view. Meditation is the way of knowing yourself without objectifying yourself in any way.

When you come to know and realize yourself through meditation, through transcendental apperception, you become, in today's diction, spiritually "enlightened," "illuminated," "liberated," or "self-realized." The mystics of the East and the West have developed and refined the art of meditation to a pure inner science and technology.

Further, through the path of meditation, the self-realized individual develops a vision or cosmivision of the Universe that is holistic and that differs from the materialistic views developed by those whose inner vision or awareness is not yet awakened. Once awakened, the Universe becomes the matrix of meaning and the individual finds the cosmic meaning of his or her life.

4. Advaita and Advaya

Part Two

Shankara

The term *Advaita* is a metaphysical concept, while it also designates Advaita-Vedanta, the system of philosophy developed by Shankara (ca. 788–820 C.E.). "Vedanta" means the "end of Vedas (veda-anta)." As a system of philosophy, it is a systemic and systematic summary of the main features of the Brahmanic thought and religion, having its immediate source in the final portions of the ancient Vedas, that is, in the Upanishads.

Advaita-Vedanta is a culmination within the long line of great thinkers and scholars, culminating in the remarkable genius of Shankara and his prolific work. He composed more than 400 works of various genres, traveled all over India defeating the contending schools of philosophy, established ashrams in the four corners of India, and thereby revived Hinduism.

While Shankara is credited with the ultimate ousting of Buddhism from India, his work unmistakably shows that he was profoundly influenced by the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. One of Shankara's closest teachers was Gaudapada, and his main work was written under the direct impact of Buddhist ideas.

Shankara integrated great many strands of thought—the Upanishadic, other Brahmanic, and Buddhist thoughts—in developing Advaita-Vedanta. One critical distinction that he developed was none other than the notion of *Advaita* in the sense of "one-without-a-second."

The Tripartite Model of Reality – Advaita Vedanta

The model of Reality that Shankara and other Vedanta philosophers developed is the hierarchical triad of *Brahman*, *Atman*, and *Maya*. In today's Western terminology, Brahman is akin to the Ground of Being or Godhead or Universal Spirit; Atman is akin to Being, God, Soul, or (Higher/ Authentic) Self; Maya is akin to the phenomenal world of appearance, form, and illusion.

The term "Maya" originally meant a creative divine power manifesting in nature as nature. The Buddhists reinterpreted it to mean the impermanent and mutable phenomenal world of appearance which an unenlightened mind mistakes as the only and true reality. This mistaken identification is "delusion" and the phenomenal world seen through the filters of delusion is "illusion."

Shankara took this fundamentally Buddhist notion of Maya and used the concept as the principle of illusion—as the device by which to explain how the Absolute One (Advaita) Reality (Brahman) appears as many in the relative phenomenal world.

The spiritual practice of Advaita-Vedanta is designed for the spiritual aspirants to self-realize Atman, their true and eternal Soul/Self Identity, ultimately through transcendental apperception. In this self-realization the adepts also realizes the symmetry of Atman and Brahman as well as the asymmetry of Brahman/ Atman and Maya. This symmetry in asymmetry and asymmetry in symmetry is akin to the mathematical notion of equivalence and topological morphism. Through this realization, the human individual attains *Moksha* (liberation) from the world of Maya – the space-time illusion.

The Tripartite Model of Experience - Mahayana Buddhism

Buddhism shares the same fundamental orientation with Vedanta and most other orthodox schools of Brahmanic Philosophy: the orientation of philosophical pursuit as a way of self-realization and of self-liberation from the phenomenal world of illusion to One/Nondual Reality.

Mahayana Buddhism, too, developed a tripartite model of Reality called “*Trikaya*” (meaning “three-hold gestalt”), consisting of *Dharmakaya*, *Sambhogakaya*, and *Nirmanakaya*. The concept of *Trikaya* evolved with the evolution of Mahayana Buddhism in India, Tibet, and China from the first complete formulation of Asanga (fourth century C.E.), the founder of Yogācāra school of Buddhism (who was from a Brahmin family but converted to Buddhism).

Buddhism emphasizes the importance of immediate experience as opposed to metaphysical speculations of which the Hindu mind is very fond. Therefore, many of the key Buddhist notions and concepts arose from the Buddhists’ phenomenological (“staying with the experience”) explorations and descriptions of their own immediate experience as they became awakened to ever-deeper innermost dimensions of Self and Reality.

Dharmakaya signifies the existential understanding or ‘innerstanding’ of the Nondual Whole or Reality with its inherent quality of Consciousness or Awareness. That is, the Consciousness that constitutes *Dharmakaya* is the same Consciousness that knows it. *Dharmakaya* is the cosmic wholeness-in-operation and is experienced as a Cosmic Matrix of Meaning.

Dharmakaya is the Reality, the Whole, or the Universe as it is experienced and ‘innerstood’ by the Buddha. *Dharmakaya* is Brahman described not as a metaphysical object but in the sense of how the interiority of Brahman feels like.

Sambhogakaya signifies an individual monadic hologram of Reality or Universe as a whole. While *Dharmakaya* designates the interior process-structure of the *cosmic* conscious awakening *imperience-experience* of the Buddha, *Sambhogakaya* designates the interior process-structure of the *individual* conscious awakening *imperience-experience* of the Buddha.

Nirmanakaya is the *innerstanding* of the *imperience-experience* of the phenomenal world or Maya with its existential limitations as well as with its evolutionary possibility for awakening. *Nirmanakaya* is the field of evolutionary spiritual visions for the Bodhisattvas – the individuals who are in action to give forms to their visions of human awakening and freedom from the illusory confines of Maya.

As the whole of Reality is suffused with *Dharma*, *Dharmakaya*, *Sambhogakaya*, and *Nirmanakaya* are all symmetrical and equivalent. *Trikaya* is a holarchical model of “wholeness within wholeness within wholeness”, not a hierarchical model such as that which is emphasized in the “Brahman-Atman-Maya” model. Thus in this model, *Sambhogakaya* is the symmetry transformation/topological morphism of *Dharmakaya*, while *Nirmanakaya* is the symmetry transformation/topological morphism of *Sambhogakaya*. (Symmetry transformation is the transformation in which the essential nature remains the same.)

Thus, the notion of *Advaya* is applied not only in terms of the complementarity and interdependence of all phenomena in the realm of *Nirmanakaya* but also of the mutual transformability of all three *kayas* or gestalt. The whole of Reality is nondual in the sense of not-two.

5. Significance of Advaita and Advaya in Contemporary Culture

Both *Advaita* and *Advaya*, both Buddhism and Hinduism, teach us that there is a mode of knowing and experience or a faculty of cognition and awareness that is supra-sensory, supra-perceptual, and supra-conceptual which, when developed, gives us experiential access to a deeper dimension of Reality, the realization which frees us from the confines of the space-time-bound phenomenal world in which we can never really find true satisfaction, fulfillment, freedom, or meaning.

Advaita and *Advaya*, though subtly different, point to a Reality that is nondual, and when we realize this ultimate and primary nondual Source Reality and its symmetrical identity with our authentic Self, we transcend and become free from the existential estrangement from which we suffer as the egologically confined human beings and regain the wholeness which we have lost.

Advaita and *Advaya* are both an invitation to recollect the world of nondual Reality filled with meaning and grandeur, while the difference between the two gives us an insight into the difference between the Brahmanic mind and philosophy and the Buddhist mind and philosophy.