

**COMMITTEE III**

Towards Ecumenism in World Philosophy

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**THE TRADITION OF ADVAITA VEDANTA**

by

**R. Balasubramanian**

Director

The Dr. S. Radhakrishnan Institute

University of Madras

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## THE TRADITION OF ADVAITA VEDĀNTA

R. Balasubramanian

### 1. WHAT THE TRADITION STANDS FOR

Three salient features of the Advaita tradition, which deserve consideration, are its ecumenistic outlook, its emphasis on the unity of knowledge, and its conception of the Self as the absolute value. The importance of these features can be appreciated if we view them vis-à-vis the advocacy of philosophical and religious pluralism without a common, unifying base, the tendency towards fragmented knowledge without a vision of unity, and the pursuit of a defective value system resulting in a life of self-alienation.

#### Towards Ecumenism in Philosophy

The long and continuous Advaita tradition which is as old as the Vedas, the basic scripture of the Hindus, provides a theoretical framework for ecumenism in philosophy by explicating the justly famous declaration, "Reality is one; the wise speak of it in many ways."<sup>1</sup> In the course of the elucidation and justification of this monistic outlook, Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara, and other teachers of this tradition have brought out the full significance of monism in the form of non-dualism through their hermeneutics of the Upani-  
sadic texts such as "In the beginning, my dear, there was Being alone, one only without a second."<sup>2</sup> This tradition, therefore, prefers to use a negative term, "advaita", which means non-dualism, i.e. the doctrine of not-two, instead of the term "monism". A thorough-going monism cannot stop short of non-dualism. If reality is one and one only, it not only implies, according to this tradition, that there is no second object, similar or dissimilar to the

real, having the same ontological status, but also that the real is devoid of internal distinction. Gauḍapāda, the first systematic expounder of the Advaita tradition whose work is available to us, argues that, <sup>since</sup> non-duality is the ultimate reality and that duality in all its forms is only an appearance thereof, there is no conflict between the standpoint of Advaita and that of others who advocate various kinds of dualistic/pluralistic philosophies.<sup>3</sup> He also maintains that the realization of the non-dual reality will be joyful as well as beneficial to all beings, since the highest reality is non-contradictory and free from dispute.<sup>4</sup>

Our day-to-day experience of plurality poses a great challenge to the philosophy of non-dualism which not only affirms the existence of one reality, but also denies the existence of a second to it. With a view to show how our experience of plurality in our day-to-day life is not inconsistent with the non-dualistic standpoint, Advaita provides an explanation to the problem of the one and the many, which is one of the important issues in every metaphysical system. Advaita discusses the problem of the one and the many on the basis of the distinction between two standpoints — the absolute and the relative. While the absolute standpoint is called pāramārthika, the relative one is called vyāvahārika. The two standpoints are also called the standpoint of knowledge and the standpoint of ignorance respectively. Whatever knowledge one may have about the things of the world, one is still in the state of ignorance so long as one does not realize the highest reality. One who has realized the highest reality is no more bound by ignorance;

such a person, it is said, has moved from the state of ignorance to that of knowledge. The distinction between pāramārthika and vyāvahārika which is very important to Advaita, is sometimes explicit, but very often implicit, in the discussion of epistemological, metaphysical, and axiological issues as well as in the formulation of the ethical and spiritual discipline in the Advaita literature. It should be borne in mind that Advaita does not deny plurality at the empirical or relative level (vyāvahārika); on the contrary, it maintains that plurality is not ultimately real, as it ceases to be when the truth of oneness is known. Consider the following text from the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad: "When there is duality, as it were, then one sees something, one smells something. But when to the knower of Brahman everything has become just one's own Self, then what should one see and through what, what should one hear and through what...?"<sup>5</sup> The idea which is sought to be conveyed by this text is that duality which is very much present in the state of ignorance is absent in the state of knowledge. Whatever appears to be real from one perspective or at one level of experience may turn out to be unreal from another perspective or level of experience. Without according ultimacy to plurality, Advaita consigns it to the relative or empirical state, i.e. the realm of ignorance. Since oneness and plurality belong to two different states or levels, there is, according to Advaita, no conflict between them. The Advaita tradition is ecumenistic inasmuch as it builds a two-level philosophical structure which accommodates both oneness and plurality, taking note of the fact of transition from the state of ignorance to the state of knowledge in human experience, mundane as well as spiritual.

### Unity of Knowledge

The Advaita tradition is committed to the ideal of the "unity of knowledge". Knowledge worth the name is knowledge of the real. Whatever may be the utility and importance of the knowledge of the things of the world, this knowledge does not fully satisfy the spiritual dimension of the human being. The quest after perfection which drives man in his philosophico-spiritual adventure will come to an end only when there is the realization of the real. Therefore, the goal of every human being must be the knowledge of the real; and when the real is known everything else is ipso facto known, because plurality which we experience in our empirical life is grounded in the real. In the case of a lump of clay and the objects made thereof, a person who knows the lump of clay, which is the cause, can claim that he knows the various objects made of it, because everyone of them is nothing but clay, and to know clay is to know the essential nature of all the objects made of clay. On the basis of the illustration of clay and its products/modifications (vikāras), the Upaniṣad formulates the principle that cause alone is real and that to know the cause is to know its effects also which are grounded in it.<sup>6</sup> There is, therefore, the need to search for the ultimate cause of the world, which alone is real and in which the entire world is grounded. The Advaitin takes his stand on the assurance of the Upaniṣad that the knowledge of the One which is the ultimate reality leads to the knowledge of the many.<sup>7</sup>

### The Self — the Absolute Value

Advaita holds the view that the Self alone is the highest value, while all other objects have only instrumental value. Advaita argues that the real, which alone exists on its own, which is one and homogeneous, which is not an object of knowledge in the sense in which the things of the world are objects of knowledge, and which is the ground of the world, is no other than the Self of the human being. The Upaniṣadic term for the ground of the world is "Brahman", and the Self of the human being is called "Ātman". The Upaniṣad not only formulates the identity of "Brahman" and "Ātman", but also speaks of Ātman, i.e. the Self, as bliss by its very nature, since it is the object of the highest love. The passage in which Yājñavalkya expounds to his wife, Maitreyī, the nature of the Self as bliss on account of its being the object of the highest love has become the locus classicus on this subject.<sup>8</sup> Wealth, cattle, progeny, husband, wife — all these, Yājñavalkya argues, have no intrinsic value in themselves. They have only instrumental value: they are valuable as they provide opportunities for the realization of the Self. This should not be interpreted to mean that the Advaitin neglects or belittles the importance of day-to-day objects including human beings such as one's kith and kin. In the value system that he advocates there is the dichotomy between the Self and the not-Self. Everything which is not-Self is dear for the sake of the Self which alone is value in itself; it should be evaluated in the context of, and in relation to, the Self which being the object of the highest love should be accorded the highest value. And that which is the object of the highest love cannot but be the highest bliss. The

pursuit of lower values as ends in themselves results in self-alienation, and self-alienation leads to frustration and suffering. After showing that everything is dear for the sake of the Self, Yājñavalkya concludes his teaching by saying that the Self alone should be realized — should be heard of, reflected on, and meditated upon.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. INTEGRAL PHILOSOPHY

The structure of the philosophy of Advaita is so integrated that its metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, and ethics must be taken together. The metaphysics of Advaita can be understood only on the basis of its epistemology; and the epistemology which presupposes and starts with the distinction between the knower and the known is transcendently grounded, since the knower-known distinction can be justified only on the basis of the reflective awareness of the Self which is the ultimate reality and which is, therefore, the subject of metaphysical investigation. In other words, though we make a distinction between metaphysics and epistemology, it is impossible to undertake investigation in one area without presupposing the other.

Since what is established as ultimate reality in metaphysics is also the highest value, the link between metaphysics and axiology is unmistakable.

Reflecting the spirit of the Indian philosophical tradition, Advaita subscribes to and justifies the unity of theory and practice. If man's bondage in empirical existence is due to his



ignorance (avidyā) of the ultimate reality which is no other than his own Self, then this ignorance can be removed by knowledge and knowledge alone. Consequently the ethical and spiritual discipline as formulated in Advaita is closely connected with its metaphysics. It is logically impossible to accept the metaphysics of Advaita without accepting the discipline it calls for. Also, the discipline must be appropriate to the goal to be attained which is no less than the realization of the real. So philosophical inquiry as pursued and practised in the Advaita tradition will encompass within its scope all the four components, viz. metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, and ethico-spiritual discipline.

### 3. IMMANENT METAPHYSICS

The metaphysics of Advaita may be characterized as immanent metaphysics which is different from transcendent metaphysics. According to Advaita, the real which is the subject matter of metaphysical inquiry does not fall outside man's experience; and any attempt to search for the real outside man's experience will be futile. If reality is transcendent, then it will result in the impossibility of metaphysics as it has been argued by the critics of metaphysics. If metaphysics has to be admitted as a legitimate discipline, then it has to search for and discover the real within the framework of our experience. It means that metaphysics must analyse and interpret the data of our experience and discover the reality. Since the metaphysics of Advaita seeks to discover the real that is caught in man's experience, it is a metaphysics of experience.



Brahman-Ātman Identity

There are two approaches to the study of reality—objective and subjective. While the objective approach consists in the study of the objects of the world with a view to find out their source or ground, the subjective approach consists in the study of man and his experience with a view to find out the reality in him. With a view to avoid the defects of both materialism and subjectivism which will be unavoidable if the objective or the subjective approach is pursued exclusively, Advaita combines both the approaches in its search for the real.

One aspect of the objective approach to the study of reality consists in explaining the things of the world through cause-effect relation. According to Advaita, this way of explaining the objects of the world will take us to the real which is non-relational and unoriginated, which is not an object of knowledge and which is the ground of the world. The arguments given by the Advaitin can be summarised in a series of propositions as follows. (1) The real must exist on its own. It must be svatassiddha. An object which exists on its own is real in-itself. (2) The things of the world are not real, because none of them exists on its own.<sup>10</sup> (3) Every object in the world, whatever it may be, is an effect of some other object. It is, therefore, originated by a cause. (4) Since it is originated, it is also relational. (5) If there are objects which are originated and relational, then they must be grounded in that which is non-originated and non-relational. (6) If every object is caught in the net of origination and relation, then nothing really can exist. (7) Something somewhere must, by its

very nature, be non-originated and non-relational in itself, so that all objects which have relational existence can hang on it or appear in it. (8) That entity which exists on its own and which is, therefore, real cannot be an object of knowledge or consciousness, because whatever is an object of knowledge or consciousness is relational and originated.

The subjective approach consists in analysing man's experience at three levels — waking (jāgrat), dream (svapna), and deep sleep (susupti) — with a view to find out the nature of the Self or consciousness that is involved in them.<sup>11</sup> Advaita adopts the phenomenological method to establish that the Self or consciousness per se is not intentional, though it appears to be intentional at the waking and dream states. Both waking and dream states constitute what may be called knowledge situation, because in both these states there is consciousness of objects: consciousness, that is to say, is intentional in these two states inasmuch as it is related to objects. As distinguished from waking and dream states, there is the state of deep sleep in which there is no awareness of any object, external or internal; it is the state where there is consciousness which is not intentional. According to Advaita, the intentionality of consciousness arises because of the association of the mind which is the adjunct (upādhi) of the Self or consciousness, although consciousness in itself is not intentional. What emerges through the phenomenological analysis of the nature of consciousness is that consciousness is not intentional and therefore is not relational.

Since consciousness is the invariable factor which is uniformly present in all our states of experience, it has no origination. It is also not an object of knowledge. Advaita maintains that there is no consciousness of consciousness, because consciousness which is homogeneous cannot split itself into subject and object, that which knows and what is known; and it is a contradiction to say that one and the same thing in the same act of cognition is both the knower and the known. Also, the admission that there is consciousness of consciousness will lead to the fallacy of infinite regress, because a second consciousness will be required to know the first consciousness, a third consciousness will be required to know the second one, and so on ad infinitum. In view of the contradiction and other difficulties that arise in the view that there is consciousness of consciousness, the Advaitin maintains that consciousness is not an object of knowledge like the things of the world. Consciousness is self-luminous (svaprakāśa) in the sense that, while it reveals other things, it itself is not revealed by anything else.<sup>12</sup>

Combining the objective and the subjective approaches the Advaitin comes to the conclusion that the reality which is non-relational and non-originated and which is the substratum or ground of the whole world is no other than the Self or consciousness, because the criterion of reality is fulfilled by the Self or consciousness. It is for this reason that the Upaniṣads declare the identity of Brahman and Ātman.<sup>13</sup>

The Fall of Man

Man as he is in empirical existence is in a fallen condition. When this "fall" of man from the state of perfection or freedom took place, no one can say. Since the present life of a human being must have been preceded by a series of previous lives whose beginning cannot be ascertained, Advaita holds that jīva, which is the name given to human and other beings, is beginningless (anādi). It means that, though we cannot figure out when the fall of man must have taken place, Advaita holds the view that man can overcome the fall he has suffered and regain his perfection or freedom in this life itself. It, therefore, attaches the greatest importance to the present life of a human being, whatever might have been its past, as it provides an opportunity to free itself from the causal chain of bondage by destroying ignorance (avidyā), which is the root cause of bondage. The ignorance man suffers from is no ordinary ignorance; it is what may be called primal ignorance or spiritual ignorance. It is ignorance about his own nature, about the Self in him which is the reality. Just as darkness can be removed only by light, even so ignorance can be removed only by knowledge. When a person attains the right knowledge of his own nature, that is to say, when he realizes the Self in him, the primal ignorance gets destroyed and he becomes free for ever — free from the cycle of birth and death which characterizes empirical existence.

The Nature of Man

Man as he is in empirical existence is a complex being consisting of spirit and matter, the Self and the not-Self. Advaita Vedānta works out its metaphysics on the basis of a clear dichotomy between the Self and the not-Self. Everything other than the Self is not-Self. If the Self (Ātman) by its very nature is consciousness which is one and non-dual, which is self-luminous, which is non-relational and unoriginated, the not-Self (anātman) is material, appears in a plurality of forms, is an object of consciousness, and is relational and originated. So far as man is concerned, the not-Self in him comprises five sheaths (pañca-kosā)<sup>14</sup> or three bodies (śarīra-traya)<sup>15</sup> which in their totality serve as a covering as it were of the Self. It is not necessary to go into the details with regard to the five sheaths or three bodies. For the sake of convenience we may say that the not-Self comprises three important factors, viz. the mind, the senses, and the body. The mind-sense-body complex which serves as the adjunct (upādhi) to the Self limits it in various ways, makes it the subject of knowledge, the agent of action, and the enjoyer of the consequences of action.

Not realizing that the Self is the reality in him on account of the primal ignorance he suffers from, man identifies himself with the mind-sense-body complex and suffers in empirical existence. The false identification with the not-Self, whether it is one's own mind-sense-body complex or whether it is any <sup>t</sup>external

object, is called adhyāsa.<sup>16</sup> Śāṅkara remarks that the fact of adhyāsa which is pervasive in all our walks of life has become so "natural" to us that we do not even take not<sup>e</sup> of it. Consider, for example, statements that we make from time to time such as "I am stout," "I am a male," "I am a Brahmin," "I am blind," "I am happy," "I am an Indian," and so on, and the way in which we carry on the business of life, both secular and spiritual, believing in what we say. The "I" which stands for the Self does not possess features such as stoutness, blindness, and happiness, which really belong to the mind-sense-body complex. It is well-known that stoutness is a characteristic of the body, and blindness of the visual sense. We also know that happiness is a quality or state of the mind. Instead of associating them with the body or the sense organ or the mind as the case may be, we ascribe them to the Self due to ignorance. It is this illicit transfer of the qualities of the mind-sense-body complex to the Self, which Śāṅkara calls superimposition (adhyāsa). The personal and social dimension of adhyāsa will be analysed in the sequel.

### The Real, the Unreal, and the Phenomenal

Advaita differentiates the physical realm comprising the numerous objects of our experience from the real (sat) and the unreal (asat). Though the physical world which we experience is existent, it is not real as it does not answer to the criterion of the real. That alone is real which is self-existent, which is non-relational and non-originated. It means that the real

remains the same all the time without suffering sublation or negation (bādha). Conversely, whatever object suffers sublation, e.g. a rope-snake, is not real. Judged by this criterion, only Brahman-Ātman can be accepted as real (sat). The Advaitin has a different criterion with regard to the unreal (asat). That is unreal, says the Advaitin, which is totally non-existent and which is not, therefore, an object of our experience. The sky-flower, for example, is unreal because there is no object or referent corresponding to the word "sky-flower". Though we speak about it, no one at any time has experienced it.

Since the physical world suffers sublation at the time of Brahman-Ātman realization, it is not real. Since it is experienced by all of us in our day-to-day life, it cannot be dismissed as unreal. The Advaitin, therefore, maintains that the ontological status of the world is peculiar such that it cannot be said to be real or unreal. He uses terms such as "mithyā" (false), "anirvacāniya" (indeterminable), "sadasad-vilakṣaṇa" (different from the real and the unreal) to refer to the peculiar ontological status of the world. He accepts that the world is empirically existent, though it is not ultimately real. To say that it is false or illusory (mithyā) is to say that it is empirically or phenomenally existent.

It is wrong to think that the Advaitin has denied the existence of the world when he says that it is false or illusory. The empirical world with all the pluralistic features and pragmatic



aspects which we experience continues to exist till Brahman-Ātman realization. To one who has realized Brahman-Ātman, everything is Brahman-Ātman. It means that only to a realized person the world as the world ceases to be. When the Advaitin says that the physical universe is false or illusory, he holds the following position which can be stated in a series of propositions.

- (1) Brahman-Ātman and the world are related as reality and appearance.
- (2) The world has no nature or existence of its own.
- (3) Whatever reality or existence it possesses is borrowed from Brahman-Ātman which is its ground or substratum.
- (4) It has, therefore, a dependent existence.
- (5) Its existence is a pointer to the reality, and so it can never be ignored.
- (6) The acceptance of the existence of the world is not detrimental to the thesis of non-dualism, since the world is not reckoned as a real entity in addition to Brahman-Ātman. While Brahman-Ātman is absolutely real (paramārtha-sat), the physical universe is empirically real (vyavahāra-sat) and so their ontological statuses, being different, do not contradict each other.
- (7) On the basis of phenomenological evidence we have to say that the pluralistic universe is a "third category" different from the real and the unreal. The world is "phenomenal" in the sense that it is different from the real and the unreal. It is not an airy nothing.

#### 4. TRANSCENDENTALLY GROUNDED EPISTEMOLOGY

##### Consciousness — the Basis of Experience

The Advaita tradition attaches as much importance to epistemology as it does to metaphysics. Like other Indian philosophers, the Advaitin holds the view that inquiry into the sources of knowledge (pramāṇa-vicāra) must be undertaken as the indispensable preliminary to the inquiry into the objects of knowledge (prameya-vicāra) whatever they may be— material objects such as the table and the tree and the trans-material reality, viz. the Self. It may be noted that, though the Self is not an object of knowledge in the sense in which a table or a tree is an object of knowledge, it is nevertheless known. And if it is known, there must be a source of knowledge therefor. Though the Self is ultimately real and must, therefore, be spoken of—if the use of such language is permissible—as belonging to the pāramārthika realm, the person who is desirous of knowing it is, indeed, at the vyāvahārika state which the Advaitin characterizes as the state of ignorance (avidyā avasthā). Though a person may know stocks and stones, he is still in the state of ignorance so long as he does not know the Self which alone is worthy of knowing. It is necessary at this stage to sound a note of warning about the imagery of the two-level structure—pāramārthika and vyāvahārika— which the Advaitin speaks about. One should not think that these two levels stand apart and that they could be perceived one above the other as one could perceive two storeys of a building one above the other.

The truth is that they are only two perspectives which are mutually exclusive. One cannot combine both the perspectives at the same time. So long as a person is ignorant of the Self, notwithstanding his knowledge of things empirical, his is the vyāvahārika perspective characteristic of a life of bondage. On the contrary, a person who has gained the vision of the Self has the pāramārthika perspective, and his way of life will be totally different from the one he was accustomed to before enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> It must also be borne in mind that the Self which is the reality and which we are searching for does exist and is involved in our day-to-day experience through the mind-sense-body complex, for in the absence of the Self which is consciousness we cannot speak of any experience, cognitive or otherwise. Since the subject-object distinction which is the basis of all epistemology is possible because of the reflective awareness of the Self or consciousness, the entire epistemology, according to the Advaitin, is transcendently grounded. Though the Self is the basis of all experience and is, therefore, as good as proved, still its essential nature remains unknown in our worldly life; consequently there is the need for epistemological inquiry with a view to discover it, i.e. to see it by removing the coverings provided by the five sheaths (pañca-kosās) or the three bodies (sārīra-traya). In other words, the Self can be known only if it is discriminated not only from the external things, but also from the mind-sense-body complex which is its upādhi. It means that the epistemological inquiry, which is undoubtedly at the empirical level, can be undertaken only through the sources of knowledge.

### Sources of Knowledge

Advaita accepts six sources of knowledge (pramāṇas): perception (pratyakṣa), inference (anumāna), comparison (upamāna), postulation (arthāpatti), non-cognition (anupalabdhi) and verbal testimony (śabda). While the first five pramāṇas give us knowledge of the phenomenal objects, śruti which comes under the class of verbal testimony gives us knowledge of the ultimate reality, viz. Brahman-Ātman. What is to be noted here is that there is a demarcation between the scope of the first five pramāṇas and that of śruti such that there is no conflict between them. Since the scope of each pramāṇa is well-defined, śruti should not be invoked as a pramāṇa in respect of phenomenal objects; similarly, perception and other pramāṇas whose work is restricted to phenomenal things are of no avail with regard to the trans-material reality, viz. Brahman-Ātman.

### Authority of Śruti

The way in which the role as well as the status of śruti is explained and justified in the Advaita tradition is unique. The Advaitin argues that the authority of śruti can be rejected only if it can be shown that (1) what śruti conveys is or can be known through other sources of knowledge; or (2) what it conveys is contradicted by other sources of knowledge; or (3) what it conveys is doubtful; or (4) it does not convey anything at all.<sup>18</sup> None of these reasons can be urged against the authority of śruti.

In view of a clear demarcation between the scope of śruti and that of the remaining pramāṇas, it can be said that the information conveyed by śruti cannot be obtained through any other source. It means that śruti can never be shown to be superfluous. Secondly, there will be scope for conflict between one pramāṇa and another if both the pramāṇas have the same subject matter. Since the subject matter of śruti does not fall within the scope of the remaining pramāṇas, what śruti says can never be contradicted by other pramāṇas. Thirdly, it cannot be said that what śruti conveys is doubtful. Doubt, error, and other defects are possible in the case of any information which has human agency as its source. Inasmuch as śruti is apauruṣeya, i.e. non-personal or trans-personal, what it conveys can never be doubted, nor dismissed as erroneous. Lastly, one cannot level the charge that śruti is not<sup>at</sup> all informative. One should have the right frame of mind in order to understand the teaching of śruti. It is not without reason that tradition has insisted upon certain requirements to be fulfilled by a person for the right comprehension of the purport of the scriptural teaching; and all these requirements are designed to help a person develop the right frame of mind which is indispensable for comprehending the scriptural teaching. To one who is a mould of clay in the human form, śruti, declares Suresvara, will not be informative.<sup>19</sup>

However authoritative and valuable śruti may be, it too, like other objects, belongs to the realm of the vyāvahārika, and is, therefore, not ultimately real. This should not be interpreted

to mean that the Advaitin degrades the status of śruti. To the Advaitin, śruti too is mithyā, even though he accepts it as a pramāṇa. That only the ignorant require the help of śruti needs no special emphasis. Just as the boat is not required by the person who has crossed the river with its help and reached his destination, even so śruti is not required by the wise man who has known the final truth through the help of śruti. Since a man of enlightenment is a light unto himself, and also to others who are ignorant, the Upaniṣad says that to such a person the Veda becomes a-Veda<sup>20</sup> as he is no more to be guided by it.

## 5. LIBERATION-ORIENTED AXIOLOGY

### Hierarchy of Values

The life-activity of man which is fully reflective of his cognition, desire, deliberation, and choice comprises the pursuit of four values — artha (material goods), kāma (pleasure), dharma (duty), and mokṣa (liberation). Man lives at two levels — organic and hyper-organic. Bodily and economic values belong to the organic level. It may appear, when superficially considered, that man is not different from animals in the pursuit of pleasure. Since not all pleasures are worthy of pursuit, man's pursuit of pleasure is not restricted to, and cannot be explained solely in terms of, his life at the organic level. Man cannot be considered to be fully "human" unless his senses have become human or refined. It means that his senses should not be subservient to the basic

needs alone such as hunger, sleep, and sex. Values of association and fellowship, intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and religious values belong to the hyper-organic level of the life of man. All the higher values of life can be brought under dharma and mokṣa. Advaita holds that dharma is not only a regulative principle of the life of man in respect of the pursuit of artha and kāma, but also a means to mokṣa.

According to Śāṅkara, man is pre-eminent among all creatures, because he alone is qualified for the performance of religious duties as well as for the pursuit of knowledge (karma-jñāna adhikārah). Śāṅkara justifies this on three grounds. First of all, the human being has the ability for acquiring knowledge not only of the things of the world, but also of the ultimate reality, as he is equipped with the mind which helps him to acquire such knowledge. Secondly, the human being has the distinctive quality of desiring certain ends as a result of discrimination, deliberation, and choice. Thirdly, without being indifferent to the object of his choice, he is in search for the right means to realize the end chosen by him and engages himself in appropriate modes of action.

### Mokṣa-The Ultimate Value

If the Self which is the reality in man is the object of the highest love, then nothing short of the Self will satisfy man. Though the Self is ever free and never bound, the human being who



is caught in empirical existence does not know the truth about the Self in him due to avidyā. On the contrary, identifying him-self, his self, with the mind-sense-body complex due to the overwhelming influence of avidyā which not only suppresses the truth, but also projects the false, he looks upon himself as limited and bound, and carries on the business of life believing—and when necessary announcing and affirming—himself to be a Brahmin or a Kṣatriya, stout or lean, blind or lame, happy or miserable, though he cannot claim any of these if he realizes that he is, indeed, the Self tenanted a body which is limited, bound, and perishable. It may be of interest in this connection to refer to a tradition<sup>al</sup> account associated with Śāṅkara. When questioned who he was by his spiritual preceptor, Śāṅkara came out with the answer<sup>21</sup> that he was neither the earth, nor the water, nor any other element; that he was neither a Brahmin nor any one bound by the rules of conduct such as varṇa-dharmas; that he was neither a teacher nor a pupil, and so on; on the contrary, he was, so he declared, that One, auspicious and pure, which remains over (eko'vasiṣṭaḥ śivaḥ kevalaḥ) after the elimination of the entire not-Self. Of course, only one in a trillion who has attained Self-realization like Śāṅkara can be expected to answer in this way. The issue here is about the truth and not about the number of people who will be able to attain it. What is emphasized is that the Self is the reality in the human being, that it is the Self that is finally sought after by every one as it is bliss by nature, and that it is, therefore, the highest or ultimate value.

To the Advaitin it does <sup>not</sup> matter whether we say that the Self is the ultimate value, or that liberation is the ultimate value. Since the Self by its very nature is free, to be the Self is to be free. What is required to be the Self is the removal of the not-Self which veils it; and the not-Self can be removed by knowledge, and knowledge alone, of the Self since the entire not-Self as well as the false identification with it is caused by ignorance of the Self. This is a unique case in which to know the Self is to be the Self and therefore, to be free. When one is not oneself, one's own Self, one is in bondage.

On the basis of three criteria Advaita holds the view that liberation (mokṣa) is the ultimate value. A value will be considered to be ultimate if it is (1) intrinsic, (2) all-satisfying, and (3) explanatory of lower values. By "liberation" we do not mean political, economic, or social liberation. Though every one of these liberations is necessary for the human being, none of them is an end in itself. On the contrary, every one of them has to be understood and justified as a means to the development of moral personality or moral agency in the human being. It may be stated here that the pursuit of values implies a set of presuppositions. First of all, since man has the competence for the performance of works and the pursuit of values, he is a moral person or a moral agent; that is to say, a moral person is one who is in possession of will and reason. Secondly, a moral person is capable of rights. He acquires this capacity for rights by virtue of his

membership in society. Thirdly, every right is a claim implicit in, and deducible from, the highest good — call it perfection or spiritual freedom — he aims at. Fourthly, to say that he is capable of rights is to say that he ought to have them, for<sup>in</sup> the absence of these rights, he ceases to be a moral person. Without these rights, he cannot pursue artha, kāma, dharma, and mokṣa. Fifthly, a moral person should have the guarantee of justice being rendered to him. Justice in the ethical sense means giving every man the indispensable conditions for reaching the goal. It, therefore, implies equality; and equality means equal opportunities to every one for the fulfilment of man's vocation as a moral being, for the achievement of perfection or spiritual liberation by himself and others. So political, economic, and social freedoms are valuable not in themselves, but only as means to spiritual freedom called mokṣa which alone is the intrinsic value. As an advocate of spiritual freedom, the Advaitin considers man in three dimensions — individual, social, and spiritual. The first two dimensions which are inseparable point to the third one as their culmination; and the achievement of the third dimension is grounded on the first two. Consequently, mokṣa which comes under the spiritual dimension of man is the fulfilment of everything that man has deliberately chosen and pursued at the individual and social levels. In short, mokṣa, i.e. spiritual liberation, is not only all-satisfying, but also is explanatory of all other values in the hierarchy. It is, therefore, the ultimate value.

### Liberation-in-life

Considering the nature of the Self as well as the cause of bondage, Advaita holds that liberation can be attained here, in this life itself. Though other philosophical schools, e.g. Sāṅkhya, advocate liberation-in-life (jīvanmukti), the Advaita explanation of jīvanmukti is different from that of other schools. Śāṅkara's arguments for liberation-in-life can be summarised in six steps.

- (1) Liberation or release is bodilessness (asāṁīratva).
- (2) If a person can remain as the Self, then he is really bodiless, though he appears to be with the body from the perspective of others. In support of this, there is the Chāndogya text which says: "There is no freedom from pleasure and pain for one who is embodied. Verily, pleasure and pain do not touch one who is bodiless."<sup>22</sup>
- (3) Being free from body is the very nature of the Self.
- (4) The embodied condition of the Self is due to avidyā.<sup>2</sup>
- (5) Since embodiment is due to wrong knowledge caused by avidyā, it follows that a man of knowledge, i.e. one who has realized the Self, becomes bodiless even while he is alive.<sup>24</sup>
- (6) There is nothing which stands in the way of a person attaining the saving knowledge here, in this life itself.

### Ethical and Spiritual Discipline

Liberation which is the ultimate value can be attained through the practice of a rigorous discipline which is both moral and spiritual. For the sake of analysis the discipline may be divided into two parts — preliminary and final.

Since the saving knowledge which liberates man can be obtained only through the Vedānta texts, Advaita insists that a person who is to undertake the study of the Vedānta texts should fulfil the following requirements, which constitute the preliminary discipline: (1) discrimination between the eternal and the ephemeral, (2) non-attachment to the enjoyment of fruit, here and hereafter, (3) possession of virtues like control of the mind and the senses, and (4) an intense desire for liberation. A person who fulfils the preliminary discipline which is by and large moral, is one who has a purified mind; and only that person whose mind is purified is eligible for the study of the Vedānta texts.

The final discipline, which is essentially spiritual, involves (1) śravaṇa which means the study of the śruti texts under the guidance of a competent teacher, (2) manana which means rational reflection on the content of the śruti texts, and <sup>(3)</sup> nididhyāsana which <sup>is</sup> repeated contemplation on the meaning conveyed by the śruti texts. The saving knowledge of Brahman-Ātman dawns on one who successfully goes through the final discipline.

## 6. THE CONTRIBUTION OF ADVAITA

The value and significance of the Advaita tradition can be highlighted by its contribution to the ideals of philosophical liberalism, religious harmony, liberation-oriented purposive life, and the unity of mankind.

At the philosophical level the distinction that Advaita makes between higher truth and lower truth on the basis of its theory of two truths or standpoints — absolute and relative — to which it is committed enables us to admit a plurality of lower, i.e. relative, truths which are relative to, and supported by, different categorial frameworks. Every lower truth is a "view-point" of reality supported by a certain categorial framework; and the change of the categorial framework will bring about a change in the view-point of reality. There can be many view-points as there can be many categorial frameworks. Every view-point is a superimposition on the reality, which is non-relational and non-originated as it transcends all the categories of human understanding such as time, space, causality, and so on. The higher truth is the truth about the ultimate reality; and there can be no conflict between the higher truth and the plurality of lower (relative) truths. It is this idea that was declared by Gaṇḍapāda when he said "The truth of non-duality does not conflict with the dualistic positions."<sup>25</sup> As for the lower truths, if one realizes that every lower truth is a relative truth, i.e. relative to a particular categorial framework, then one will appreciate the possibility of a plurality of relative truths, and there should not be any quarrel over this.

At the religious level, Advaita maintains that though there is one God, there are many forms and names of God. God who is formless and nameless is invested with a form and a name by the devotee for his own convenience of moral and spiritual development.

The plurality of names and forms of God is thus not only possible but also intelligible, just because God has no fixed name and form. This way of looking at the problem will help us to achieve intra-religious and inter-religious harmony.

At the value level, the Advaita theory of liberation-in-life will help everyone of us to lead a purposive life in pursuit of the ultimate value, taking advantage of the opportunities available in this life for the practice of secular and religious duties as well as for the acquisition of the saving knowledge.

Though adhyāsa is basically an epistemic-metaphysical concept, it is not without implications in respect of the personal and social life of a human being. Everyone should pay attention to the personal and social dimension of adhyāsa for the purpose of leading a purposive life of moral and spiritual upliftment. Man's life is such that he is called upon to play different roles in his life — the role of a husband, the role of the head of an institution, the role of the secretary of a club, and so on. The roles are both relative and temporary. One plays, for example, the role of a husband in relation to somebody; the role of the secretary of a club is never permanent. The very fact that man is able to play different roles at the same time shows that he is essentially different from all of them. The failure to realize this important truth leads to the problem of "role-identification". When a person plays a certain role, e.g. the role of the head of an institution, he not



only "projects the image" of the role, but also identifies himself with that, forgetting the fact that he can never play that role all the time. Identification with a role invariably produces arrogance and pride, what the Greeks called the hubris. When a person is the head of the government for a number of years, the strong identification with the role makes him, at the height of his power and pride, think that he is the government, that he is the state. The problem of role-identification manifests itself in other ways as well. Someone claims to be a Hindu or a Christian, a Brahmin or a Kṣatriya, man or woman, and claims privileges and special considerations thereby. Whether the term "role" is used in a functional sense or as a class concept, there is problem of role-identification, what Śāṅkara calls adhyāsa. Why does this problem of role-identification or adhyāsa arise? "It is because of ignorance (avidyā)," answers Śāṅkara. The Self alone is real, and everything else — the mind, the senses, and the body as well as the things of the external world and the "stations" in life — is not real. If only <sup>man</sup> ~~he~~ understands the truth of the Self and is sensitive to the fact that he plays different roles due to adhyāsa, he will be humble in his life, responsible in his conduct and detached and self-controlled in his attitude and outlook.

At the social level, Advaita helps us to realize the unity of all human beings. One of the major difficulties that stands in the way of achieving unity at the human level is the theory of difference which is propagated and practised by many, sometimes explicitly and very often implicitly. The Advaita theory that one and the same

reality, call it the Self or Spirit, or the unconditioned Absolute, is in all of us —men and women, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the handicapped, the ruler and the ruled, the black and the white —provides a theoretical framework for working towards the ideal of the unity of all human beings.

N O T E S

- (1) Rg-veda, I. 164.46.
- (2) Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 6.2.1.
- (3) Gaudapāda, Māṇḍūkya-kārikā, 3.18.
- (4) Ibid., 4.2.
- (5) 4.5.15.
- (6) See Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 6.1.4. Giving the example of clay and its modifications, the Upaniṣad says that clay alone is real, while its modifications are only a name arising from speech. Generalising from this, the Advaitin says that cause alone is real.
- (7) Ibid., 6.1.3. "ekavijñānena sarva-vijñānam" is the promise of this text.
- (8) See Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 2.4.5.
- (9) Ibid. "ātmanastu kāmāya sarvaṃ priyaṃ bhavati. ātma vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ."
- (10) When Nārada asks Sanatkumāra: "Venerable Sir, on what is the Infinite established?" the latter replies: "On its own greatness" (sve mahimni). So far as the objects of the world are concerned, Sanatkumāra observes that every one of them is dependent on another (anyo hi anyasmin pratiṣṭhitah). See Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 7.24.1-2.
- (11) See Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, 3-5 and the relevant verses of Gaudapāda's Māṇḍūkya-kārikā, which explain the triple states of experience.

- (12) The Advaitin defines self-luminosity as follows: "ananyāvabhāsa yatve sati svetara - sarvāvabhāsaśaktvam svaprakāśatvam."
- (13) What are called "mahāvākyas", i.e. the principal texts of the Upaniṣads, teach the grand equation of Brahman and Ātman: e.g. "ayam ātmā brahma" (This Self is Brahman) which occurs in the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, 2, and "tat tvam asi" (That thou art) which occurs nine times in the sixth chapter of the Chāndogya.
- (14) The five sheaths are: sheath of matter (annamaya-kosā), sheath of vitality (prāṇamaya-kosā), sheath of mind (manomaya-kosā), sheath of intellect (vijñānamaya-kosā) and the sheath of bliss (ānandamaya-kosā). Just a scabbard covers the sword kept in it, even so the five sheaths which are telescopically arranged one inside the other cover the Self. See the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, 2.1-5.
- (15) The three bodies are: causal body (kāraṇa-sārīra), subtle body (sūkṣma-sārīra) and gross body (sthūla-sārīra). It may be stated here that the Upaniṣad works out a correlation between the five sheaths and the three bodies by apportioning the former to the latter. The sheath of matter constitutes the gross body; the sheaths of vitality, mind, and intellect constitute the subtle body; and the sheath of bliss is the causal body.
- (16) Śāṅkara defines adhyāsa as "atasmin tadbuddhiḥ". If, for example, what is not silver is cognized as silver, it is <sup>a</sup> case of adhyāsa. Here, there is the superimposition of "silverness" on the given object, say, shell. See Śāṅkara's introductory portion, called adhyāsa-bhāṣya, of his commentary on <sup>the</sup> Brahma-sūtra.
- (17) In an oft-quoted passage Śāṅkara conveys this idea as follows: "So the man who has intuited Brahman to be the Self does not belong to this world of samsāra, as he did before. On the contrary, he who still belongs to this world of samsāra as before has not intuited Brahman." See his commentary on the Brahma-sūtra, 1.1.4.

- (18) See Suresvara's Naiṣkarmya-siddhi, 3.35, sambandhokti:  
"yasmāt sarvatraiva anādara-nimittam pramāṇasya pramāṇāntara-  
pratipanna-pratipādanam vā, viparīta-pratipādanam vā, sāṃśayita  
pratipādanam vā, na vā pratipādanam iti. na ca eteṣāṃ anyatamad  
kāraṇamasti."
- (19) Ibid., 3.38.
- (20) Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 4.3.22. Here the Upaniṣad describes how the Self in the state of deep sleep is beyond empirical distinctions such as castes and the stages of life, good and bad, etc. In the same way, an enlightened man who has known the Self and remains as the Self is beyond all empirical distinctions. To him the Vedas too are not Vedas.
- (21) Śaṅkara's answer is in ten verses which are called Dasasloki. The Siddhāntabindu written by Madhusūdanasarasvatī is one of the celebrated commentaries on this, <sup>small,</sup> but most profound and significant composition of Śaṅkara's.
- (22) Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 8.12.1.
- (23) The causal chain which binds the Self through embodiment starts from avidyā. The explanation of the several links of the causal chain has been given by Śaṅkara and others. Avidyā is the cause of desire and aversion which, in their turn, lead to action, good or bad; action is the cause of birth; and birth is the cause of suffering.
- (24) See Śaṅkara's commentary on the Brahma-sūtra, 1.1.4: "mithyā-  
pratyayanimittatvāt saśarīratvasya, siddham jīvato'pi viduṣo  
asārīratvam."
- (25) See Māṇḍūkya-kārikā, 3.18 already cited in note (3).