



Advaita Vedanta

by Ram Banerjee

Based on the words of Swami Dayananda and Swami Paramarthananda

The essence of Advaita Vedanta is derived from the material contained in the Upanishads - a part of sacred Indian texts called the Vedas, written around 1500BC, though they are thought to have existed in spoken form prior to 6000BC. The Vedas consist primarily of hymns and rituals relating to the various Gods of what came to be the Hindu religion. The Upanishads are mostly found in the final sections of the Vedas, which are also called Vedanta (i.e. end or culmination – Sanskrit *anta* – of the *Veda-s*).

Advaita is a non-dual philosophy, which means that in reality there are not two. This is the literal meaning of the word “advaita” – *a* meaning “not,” and *dvaita* “two.” This is an alien and apparently meaningless concept to most people at first hearing, but hopefully its meaning will become clearer as we progress on our journey for the Truth.

When we compare human beings with other animals, there are many things in common, such as need for food, survival, rest, fear of insecurity and drive to propagate their species. If there are so many things in common, what makes human beings the premier species? It is the faculty of discrimination (thinking and knowing) using the intellect. If you remove this one faculty from human beings, there is no difference between an animal and a human. Because of this faculty, a human is able to study his life and learn from life’s experiences and project the future with a clear goal regarding his life and consistently work for the fulfilment of those goals.

These goals are only relevant to humans since animals neither have such goals nor do they work towards their fulfilment. All animal goals are instinctive and programmed. One important difference between all other living beings and human beings is that all other living beings do not have a free will. They do not have a choice regarding their lives. They all live according to their natural programming. Those that live in water, will live in water, those that live on the shore will live on the shore. A bird will only build its nest in a particular fashion using only a particular material. They do not have a choice. Even in food habits, they do not have a choice. A cow will not convert to fast food after settling in America! Animals don’t have a free will. They are all programmed creatures in keeping with universal harmony. Animals will not create environmental problems. They will not destroy the forests, pollute the oceans or destroy the rivers. Problems starts with human beings. Human beings have choice and will power and free will can be abused.

Many think that the definition of freedom is to be able to do whatever one wants. That is NOT freedom since it is action based on what your mind desires. Your body thus becomes a slave to the mind. It is slavery, the exact opposite to freedom. A diabetic may crave for a bar of chocolate and it would be the easiest of tasks to let the mind win. But discrimination comes in being able to temper that desire with knowledge of what harm that sugar may have and thus CHOOSING, through free will, not to follow the craving. Thus, the true definition of freedom is **that which is available for abuse**.

Not only do we have free will, we also have the power of knowledge. Even a mighty elephant can be slain with a single shot. Knowledge is power and human knowledge is available for abuse. If the human being is not taught properly, he will not only destroy creation but all the living beings in creation and in the process, he will destroy himself. Rules for harmonious living had to be prescribed as soon as human beings came into existence, that prescription is called the *Vedas*. The Vedas teach us how not to abuse free will and how to be a responsible citizen of the world. Whether I like it or not, I have to be a responsible citizen, not only for my sake, but also for the sake of the entire creation. My way of life should be in harmony with creation.

Human beings are thus unique because of the discriminative power of the intellect. One human being can have many goals and different human beings often have differing goals – many of them diagonally opposite. For example, one may be trying to buy the house that another is trying to sell. One may be trying to divorce a spouse that another is trying to marry. On closer analysis it turns out that rather than many goals, the goal is only one – the ultimate goal. Through the ‘fog’ of so many apparently different goals, human beings are actually only trying to seek one goal and that is happiness or fulfilment. Whether it is through status, position, possessions or fame, humans seek happiness alone. How can we know?

Let us consider a person as he buys an object such as a television, car or house for example, hoping that the object will give him happiness. Eventually, the same object will become faulty. The moment it starts to give problems, it is no longer wanted and it is sold or disposed of in some way. Everybody is working towards improving human happiness alone. Every invention is ultimately connected with human happiness alone. The Vedas try to help us to achieve this happy and fulfilled life.

The Vedas are split into four (known as Rig-Veda, Yajur-Veda, Sama-Veda and Atharva-Veda). They are called Vedas because they are a source of knowledge on how a person may identify the goal and achieve it. These Vedas were ‘revealed’ to Rishis (the seers). The idea intended here is that the rishis served as a medium and through the rishis the Vedas are revealed to humanity. The rishis are not the creators of the mantras of the Vedas. The rishis are known as the ‘seers’ of the mantras. The Vedas are a body of knowledge, not a body of Sanskrit words. Sanskrit words are purely words of the rishis.

In English we have two words “invention” and “discovery”. Inventing is creating something new while something that is already there is discovered. Similarly, the rishis did not invent the mantras by using their intellect but the mantras were already afloat in the creation and the rishis, with their extraordinary subtle minds, were able to capture these mantras like a television set capturing the television signals in the air. In turn, the rishis have handed down this to us through a guru-student lineage tradition.

There are two branches of knowledge, higher or superior knowledge and lower or inferior knowledge. All the material sciences, Physics, Astronomy, Chemistry etc. are called inferior knowledge. Spiritual knowledge is called superior knowledge. Why should this be so? Inferior knowledge is the study of the effects while superior knowledge is the study of the original cause. Study of the effect is always inferior and study of the cause is always superior. Why? Because, by knowing one effect, another effect cannot be known whereas by studying one cause all effects are known. For example, by knowing chemistry one cannot know physics. By knowing football, one cannot know rugby. By knowing one plant one cannot know another. However, if one knew about that which is the cause of everything then one can know about every effect since the cause must pervade every effect. For example, wood is the cause of a wooden table or chair. If one knew about wood, one would know about wooden tables AND wooden chairs since wood permeates every wooden table and wooden chair. The teachings state that there is one limitless cause of the entire universe called ***Brahman***. It is said to be the cause of every effect.

The Vedas are the basic sacred text intended to assist human beings in their pursuit of happiness. They offer assistance if requested. They do not want to impose of force themselves upon us. We may use them if desired and free of cost.

The Vedas say that happiness that is the ultimate goal of every human being, can be classified into two types based on the source of the happiness. One happiness is the happiness coming from an external source in the form of various objects, people or situations. The majority of people are working in the field of externally-sourced happiness alone. They identify the source of such happiness, such as an object, and then set about its acquisition and preservation for the purpose of regular enjoyment. One may desire, a house, a car, a relationship, a child and so on. All are external sources of happiness.

The Vedas say that there is also an internal source of happiness where the happiness you seek is not based on outside objects, people or situations. If there is an internal source of happiness, how come the majority of human beings are seeking the externally sourced happiness? The inner source of happiness is unfortunately unknown or hidden. Just like a farmer with treasure hidden on his land considers himself poor because of his ignorance of the treasure, so humans consider themselves limited through

their ignorance of their true selves. So, how does one acquire internally-sourced happiness? Just like a water diviner is able to ‘find’ water underground where it is hidden from most people, the Vedas are able to identify the treasure of internally-sourced happiness. However, it is not sufficient to identify the treasure, you have to acquire it and own it by digging and working hard. The Vedas therefore identify the knowledge required as well as suggest mechanisms for digging and hard work, at the intellectual and emotional level, to acquire the treasure of this knowledge. The identifying is called *Sravana* and the acquiring is called *Manana* and *Nididhyasana*.

Sravana is achieved through listening intently to a teacher without judgement. So thorough must the listening be, that one should be able to paraphrase back the content of the teaching. Judgement must be set aside during this time because judgement stops the acquisition of new information. Since you are there to learn something you do not know, what is coming to you must be new. Yet judgement is based on what you already know so you judge new information with what you already know and accept or reject based on your current understanding using your existing knowledge. This is sure to block out anything new, there is no point in attending the class. If you wish to merely hear that which reinforces your current understanding then there is no one that can teach you anything new.

It is therefore extremely important to choose a qualified teacher who not only knows the subject being taught but also knows how to teach. Once the teacher is accepted, the teachings must be also be accepted unconditionally, ‘subject to future verification’. For example, you have chosen to study mathematics at a prestigious university and on the first day of class, the head of mathematics, a learned and well-respected professor, writes $E=mc^2$ on the board. This is something you may have seen or heard about before but you have no idea if it is true. You do not yet possess the skills to prove it or understand it fully. Therefore, you accept it as a correct statement coming from an eminent teacher in the firm belief that before too long he will be able to explain to you the true meaning of the equation. This is unconditional acceptance subject to future verification.

Having understood what has been said, the next stage is analysis. Here the student asks the teacher questions and discusses the information with a view to eliminating any doubt in its understanding. This second stage is called *Manana*. By the end of this stage the information becomes knowledge because it is entirely understood without any gaps or doubt.

The third stage is called *Nididhyasana* where one takes the knowledge already acquired and makes it one’s own through deep contemplation. This can be through meditation or quiet uninterrupted contemplation. The fully understood knowledge thus becomes one’s truth not based on faith but based on understanding. Faith has to be

preached. Knowledge has to be taught. That is why the Vedas have to be taught by competent teachers.

Through these three, you can identify and own internally-sourced happiness as your own. So, what are the differences between externally-sourced happiness and internally-sourced happiness? Which is better? The teachings merely present the pros and cons of each. It does not want to impose a choice, which is entirely ours to make.

The nature of externally-sourced happiness seems easier to acquire and I feel at home since everybody around me appears to be after it also. I am not judged to be odd since I hold similar values to those around me. However, since externally-sourced happiness comes from an external source, I rely on external factors to be happy which means that it is a conditional happiness dependent upon the many unpredictable conditions of objects, people and situations. There is a constant threat, anxiety or fear that any one of these conditions may go away. Thus, the *first defect* of externally-sourced happiness is the fear that it may go away. This fear is justified since it is a condition of every object that it will change or end. Either I will be separated from it or it will be separated from me. All external objects are thus transient.

Secondly, whatever is taken or borrowed from the outside, is certainly not my own and is subject to loss at any time. For example, consider rice cooking in a pot. The rice cooks because it borrows heat from the water but the water itself borrows heat from the pot, which in turn borrows heat from the fire. Does the fire borrow its heat from elsewhere? No, and since heat is intrinsic to fire and need not be borrowed, the heat will never leave the fire. What is not borrowed cannot be lost. What is one's nature is never lost. The vessel and the water can go cold when removed from the fire but the fire will always be hot. Thus, whatever is borrowed is impermanent and whatever is natural to it is permanent. Thus Externally-sourced happiness, which is borrowed from the outside, can never be permanent. This is its *second defect* that externally-sourced happiness is not permanent.

Since internally-sourced happiness doesn't come from the outside, it is unconditional. It is not affected by the fluctuation of external conditions. For example, the heat of the fire is not affected by the fluctuations of the water. Whatever is unconditional, natural or intrinsic to myself will be permanent because it is not coming from the world. The world cannot threaten me. My fulfilment is not dependent on the world. Being totally dependent on the external world makes a person miserable as conditions change.

It is your choice whether you choose externally-sourced happiness or internally-sourced happiness. The Vedas do not wish to impose one or the other but rather set about explaining methods to acquiring both types of happiness. The Vedas broadly divide

themselves into two parts to provide methods for both types of happiness. The first part of the Veda (**Veda purva**) deals with externally-sourced happiness and the last part of the Veda (**Veda anta**) deals with internally-sourced happiness. This last part of the Veda is also known as the Upanishads (that which destroys dependence). Dependence on external conditions is called bondage and this dependence is destroyed by the Upanishads.

The *first difference* between Veda purva and Veda anta is that they deal with externally-sourced happiness and internally-sourced happiness respectively.

The *second difference* between the two parts is that Veda purva promotes dependence on external factors and therefore deals with dependence. Whereas Veda anta talks about happiness from oneself and therefore promotes independence or freedom.

The *third difference* is that Veda purva promotes acquisition because it talks about external factors that I have to acquire to be happy. Whereas Veda anta talks about happiness coming from oneself and since one learns to depend on oneself, one does not depend on external factors. Therefore, Veda anta promotes dropping dependences and promotes renunciation. A free person does not want to hold onto anything.

The *fourth difference* is that Veda purva promotes action. Action is required to procure the external objects that I need in order to make me happy. All actions have a consequence or result. The lesson to be learnt is that all results of actions, however pleasant they may seem, have three intrinsic defects:

1. They are all mixed with pain. They are not pure pleasure. Acquiring involves pain, maintaining involves pain and losing involves pain.
2. No worldly accomplishment can bring contentment as you seek the next, higher, accomplishment. You are never aware of what you have but you are always aware of what you do not have.
3. It makes a person a slave of those things. You get used to things to which ultimately you become a slave. The more you come to depend on a thing, the more you lose your independence. The more your accomplishments, the more you move from independence to dependence. This is called bondage or addiction.

As long as these defects are there, a person will continue to struggle. The only difference is that the man with £100 is working for the next £100 and a man with £1000 is working for the next £1000. The richer the person, the richer is the loan. As long as a person accomplishes these defective goals, the struggles of life will never be over. All these goals therefore can never bring the struggle to an end.

Whereas in Veda anta, I need not work to acquire because I am not reliant on objects. I have to identify within me what is the source of happiness, where is it, what is it and how to tap into that source. No action is required since I have to discover. Hence Veda anta is the path of knowledge and discovery.

Having presented these two sections, the Vedas point out that we are free to choose but just like the small print on cigarette packets, it states that externally-sourced happiness will promote dependence that will lead to bondage. Whereas, Veda anta will promote independence that will lead to freedom.

Once this discriminative understanding - between externally and internally sourced happiness - comes through experience, we can respond in two ways. We can either blame things outside us or come to realise that it is my defect because I am dependent on external factors. As they say “*disappointments come to a person who has appointments with the future.*” When something doesn’t happen, as I want it to, I can either blame the world or I can blame myself for my own weakness of attachment. Therefore, such a person acquires dispassion towards all results of actions. Dispassion is not hatred, which is every bit as negative as attachment. Dispassion is neither attachment nor hatred. Dispassion is transcending hatred and attachment. Let objects, situations and people be around, but for security and fullness do not come to ‘lean’ on these external factors. Attachment is psychological dependence.

It is worth noting that Veda purva has another very important role. Even though I pursue externally-sourced happiness and acquire many objects from which I derive happiness, I still suffer from anxiety that they may not last. Majority of people do not mind that but there are some who want freedom from this anxiety. The Vedas point out that even after developing a desire for internally-sourced happiness, one cannot directly go to Veda anta because desire alone is not enough, one requires qualifications to enter Veda anta.

To attain these qualifications, one has to continue in Veda purva but make modifications to one’s actions. The modified actions (described in the Vedas itself) can provide the qualifications necessary to progress on to Veda anta. Thus, Veda purva has a two-fold benefit. It can provide a person with externally-sourced happiness (material pleasures) and it can provide a person with the required qualification to go on to internally-sourced happiness. Having discussed the two portions of the Vedas, we shall now focus on Veda anta or simply **Vedanta** that gets its name from its position at the end of the Vedas.

The popular name for Vedanta is **Upanishad**. The word Upanishad has three sections ‘upa’, ‘ni’ and ‘shad’. The first ‘upa’ indicates that this self-knowledge has to be acquired from a guru alone. Nobody can do self-study of the Upanishad. Doing so

will lead to 90% not understood and worse still, 10% misunderstood. The next part ‘*ni*’ means that this self-knowledge has to be acquired, thoroughly and comprehensibly without any doubt or vagueness. Part knowledge is a dangerous thing. Ignorance is bliss, full knowledge is Bliss but half knowledge is a problem. Thus, this knowledge has to be systematically acquired. The final ‘*shad*’ means destroyer and refers to all types of psychological dependences, which are called *bondage*. Thus, Upanishad means **‘that knowledge that is to be acquired from a guru, thoroughly gained which will destroy bondage.**

Vedanta appears at the end of all four Vedas. These Vedas have many subdivisions (or branches) much like chapters in a book. Originally the Vedas had 1180 branches. Many branches have been lost just like species on earth. Among these original 1180 Upanishads, the essence can be found in 108 Upanishads. Out of these the most famous and popular are 10 in number. Adi Shankara (a great 8th century Vedantic scholar) has written commentaries on these 10 Upanishads. Out of 108 or even 1180 why should do we study only 10? Because these are predominantly discussed in the ***Brahma Sutras*** – an advanced Vedic text – which gives logical support to Vedic teachings.

The ***Bhagavad-Gita*** is the Upanishads themselves in a diluted form. Thus, three books are considered essential to Vedantic study – the Bhagavad-Gita, The Upanishads and The Brahma Sutras. Of these the Bhagavad-Gita is the most diluted one while the Brahma Sutras is the most concentrated. These together are known as the foundation books on self-knowledge.

Fundamental teachings of the Vedas

Vedanta teaches about three things. The first teaching is that I am infinite and all pervading. Every personal experience seems to prove my limitation. I am limited by size, intelligence, dexterity, length of life, yet Vedanta shockingly says that I am the whole and infinite.

The second teaching is that there is no such thing as the world and if it is there at all (a concession to appease us), it is unreal. This is unbelievable news to someone who has grown up in the world all their life! Yet, Vedanta says that the eternal, invisible Brahman is the only reality and the changing, visible world is unreal.

Finally, all my life, if I have believed in God, I have believed that *Ishvara* (God) is somewhere; I am the simple devotee and one day I wish to merge with him. Whether you believe in Ishvara or not, Vedanta says that Ishvara, you are. This is the final unbelievable thing we are taught.

Therefore, I cannot accept the Vedic teachings of myself, the world and Ishvara based on my experience. Yet there is no Vedic teaching apart from this. With clear knowledge I should understand and be convinced of all these three basic tenants of the Vedas. I need not convince others. I need only to ask myself, am I convinced? Once I am convinced, it matters little to me if the whole world is convinced or not. Therefore, all questions or doubts regarding these basic teachings must be resolved.