

Advaita Vedanta

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Based on the words of Swami Dayananda and Swami Paramarthananda

Is the World an Illusion?

Many people who casually study Advaita Vedanta (non-duality) may come away with the impression that the Vedic teachings imply that the world is an illusion. For scientists and other ‘rational’ people living in the real world this may seem preposterous. For the record, the Vedas say that the world is not an illusion. The world is tangible, material and useful, it’s just that it’s NOT REAL.

The definition of REAL in Vedanta is something that is constant throughout the three periods of time – the past, present and future. Everything else is transient. How can you use the word real to something that exists only for a certain period of time? You would have to qualify it by saying it was real at that time or at that place.

The Upanishads believe that there is a cause for everything. Only nothing can come from nothing. Therefore, every object in the universe has an underlying cause. This *cause-and-effect* relationship is a popular method of revealing Brahman as the cause of the universe. If Brahman is the cause then the world is the effect, the relationship between Brahman and the world is one of cause and effect. One needs a deep understanding of this cause-and-effect principle to fully analyse this problem.

When we say Brahman is the *cause* of the universe, the natural question to ask is “what type of cause is Brahman?” Cause may be of two types – intelligent and material. The intelligent cause is the maker and the material cause is the material from which it is made. For a wooden table, the carpenter is the intelligent cause and wood is the material cause. For an ornament, the goldsmith is the intelligent cause and gold the material cause. For a pot, the potter is the intelligent cause and the clay is the material cause and so on.

The Upanishads use certain examples to explain Brahman more clearly. Let us take the example of the clay pot. If the pot is produced by the potter out of clay, then, as we have said, the potter is the intelligent cause and the clay is the material cause. We can derive the following corollaries.

First that clay is permanent. It was there before the pot, when the pot is there and will be there even after the pot has ceased to be. By contrast, the pot was not there initially and it will not be there again, so the pot is impermanent. So, the first derived understanding is that the cause is permanent and the effect is impermanent. Extended to

Brahman, this means that Brahman (the cause) is permanent and the world (the effect) is impermanent.

Secondly, if there are many clay pots, the first pot is located here, the second is there, and the third (say a lamp) is located somewhere else and so on. Wherever the pot is, the lamp is not and wherever the lamp is, the pot is not. From that it is clear that every product is located in one place whereas wherever the pot is, clay is there and wherever the lamp is, clay is there. Therefore, the clay is behind every product. Clay pervades every product. It is not located to a single place whereas every product is located in a limited place. Extended to Brahman, this means that Brahman (the cause) pervades all. There is nowhere that Brahman is not whereas the effects are located in many places.

Thirdly, the pots, lamps, jugs and plates (collectively the products) are many but behind the plurality of products the clay (the cause) is one. So, although the effects can be many, the cause is only one. Extended to Brahman, this means that Brahman is one but the effects (the world of objects) are many.

Fourthly, the clay has got an existence of its own, but the pot cannot exist independent of clay. The clay has independent existence whereas the pot has a dependent existence. The very existence of the pot does not belong to the pot itself. It is **BORROWED** from the clay and temporarily gifted to the pot. How do we know that? What is the proof? If the pot had its own intrinsic existence, without depending on the clay then even after removing the clay, the pot would exist. If clay and pot were two independent entities enjoying independent existence, the removal of one would not affect the other.

What we find when removing the clay is that the pot does not have an existence of its own. The pot is a dependent thing known as a ‘non-substantial entity’. In Sanskrit we say clay is **satyam** (non-dependent) and pot is **mithya** (dependent). Even though we use two words – pot and clay – there are NOT two substances. There is only one substance. In the case of wood and table, water and ocean and gold and bangle, there are two names but only one substance. From this we can say that the **cause is satyam** and the **effect is mithya**. What is the definition of mithya? Mithya only has a verbal existence rather than a substantial existence. There is no substance called pot for it is only clay.

That Brahman which is the cause of the universe is satyam. It is independently existent and does not require anything else for its existence. Brahman is imperishable and from that varieties of products are born and will in turn go back to Brahman. At the time of dissolution, all products will return to the material cause. Therefore, Brahman being the material cause will have everything return to it. Thus, Brahman is not only the cause of an object but also the resolution of an object. To this one can add that Brahman

is the cause of the survival of the object. Thus Brahman¹ is (1) the cause, (2) the existence and (3) the resolution of all objects. Because of clay alone, the pot is born, because of clay alone the pot exists and into clay alone the pot goes back. Because of Brahman alone the universe is born, exists and into Brahman it returns.

If we have two causes for every effect and all objects in creation are effects, then what is the intelligent and material cause of this creation? Of these, which cause is Brahman? The Upanishads conclude that Brahman happens to be BOTH the intelligent and the material cause of creation. Normally we say the carpenter CREATES the table and the wood BECOMES the table. The goldsmith CREATES the ornament and gold BECOMES the ornament.

Similarly, from the perspective of intelligent cause, we say Brahman has created the world. But from the perspective of the material cause we say that Brahman is manifested AS the world. How can one Brahman be both the intelligent and material cause? Just as a spider is both the intelligent and material cause of the web, so Brahman can be both. The general rule is that the intelligent and the material causes are different but the exceptional rule is that they can be identical. Brahman is that exception.

When we say that Brahman is the material cause of the universe, we can have certain misconceptions. Just as clay is the material cause of pots, water is the material cause of waves and gold is the material cause of ornaments, Brahman is the material cause of this creation. Through this definition, the Vedic teachings want to convey that there is no world that is separate from Brahman. Just as there are no pots separate from clay, no waves separate from water and no ornaments separate from gold. There is no product separate from the material cause. If Brahman is the material cause and the world is the product, the teachings want to say that there is no world separate from Brahman. *World* is only a word just as ornament is only a word. There is no substance called ornament. Gold is one substance; ornaments are non-substantial. Similarly, this wonderful universe that we experience, that appears to be solid and substantial is really speaking non-substantial. Once we understand that the world is non-substantial, then we have to ask ourselves, do we want to depend on a substantial or non-substantial thing. Would it not be foolish to depend on a non-substantial thing?

Dependence on a non-substantial thing will lead to disappointment, frustration, anger, worry, sorrow and fear. If at all you want to depend on something, better to depend on the substantial Brahman rather than the non-substantial world. Enjoy the non-

¹ Here we are talking about Brahman as the material cause not the intelligent cause. From the clay, the pot is born and will eventually return to the clay. It will not return to the potter, which is the intelligent cause.

substantial world but do not have an emotional dependence upon it. Thus, one should be clear that the world is non-substantial.

We should also know what the teachings DOESN'T want to convey. Language is a funny thing. When we say, "This person is the pillar of the organization" we mean that the organization is maintained and supported by him and without him it would collapse. What we do not mean is that the fellow is an inert round column that belongs to the organization. Similarly, when we say Brahman is the material cause, it may be extended incorrectly. We generally find that the material cause is matter. Whether it is clay, water or gold, but in the case of Brahman, it is conscious material cause unlike other material causes. Secondly the material cause is normally tangible. We may therefore incorrectly take Brahman as a tangible material molded into the universe. Instead, we need to note that Brahman is an intangible formless material cause.

Brahman is a sentient, intangible material cause. The basic 'stuff' of the universe is consciousness, which is intangible. That is why scientists also point out that this tangible world is energy and energy happens to be intangible. If intangible energy can produce the solid universe then you can extend to say that the intangible consciousness is the 'stuff' of the universe.

Finally, whenever the material cause produces an effect, the material cause undergoes a modification. Wood undergoes a modification to look like a table. Therefore generally, the material cause is changing whereas in the case of Brahman, the material cause is unchanging. We have to remember these three factors i.e. Brahman the changeless, formless conscious principle is the material cause of the universe. Therefore, by extension, this universe, which is the product of Brahman, cannot exist without the changeless, formless consciousness since no effect can exist without its cause.

This is unique to Vedanta. This concept is not available in any material science nor is it available in any philosophy either. In all the systems of philosophy, matter is the material cause. In Vedanta alone, we have a unique teaching that rather than matter, consciousness is the stuff of the universe. When we think matter is the stuff of the universe we call it material science and when we think consciousness is the stuff of the universe, we call it spiritual science.

The lessons to be drawn are:

(1) Brahman is the material cause and the world is the effect, therefore Brahman alone appears in the form of the world.

This means that I need not do anything special to experience Brahman because whenever I am experiencing the world, I am experiencing Brahman alone. I need not separately work to experience the wood whenever I am experiencing the furniture. I am

experiencing the wood alone in the form of furniture. After experiencing the furniture, I need not separately do any practice to experience the wood. If a person holds the effects in the hand and is struggling to experience the cause, then such a person is indeed foolish. To experience a table and ask how may I experience the wood is indeed foolish. The very experience of the effect is the experience of the cause in effectual form. You cannot experience the table without experiencing the wood. No one can say they have not experienced Brahman. The Upanishad says that you have experienced Brahman; you are experiencing Brahman; you cannot experience anything other than Brahman.

(2) If Brahman is the cause and the world is the effect, there is no world other than Brahman.

There is no substance called world other than Brahman. When wood is the cause and the furniture is the effect, we know that there is no substance called table or chair, there is only one substance called wood. What is the table? It has only a verbal, non-substantial existence. All effects only have a verbal, non-substantial existence. The world is only a WORD, it is not a substance. This alone we technically call *mithya*.

The practical lesson is that as long as you hold onto something non-substantial you are in *samsara* (the ups and down of life) while as long as you hold onto something substantial, you are free from samsara, you attain *moksha* (freedom).

If Brahman is all there is then we need to deal with how to know that Brahman. We have said that Brahman is the material cause and the world is effect. This is the cause-and-effect relationship. What are the differences between cause and effect?

- (1) Cause is one but the effects are many.
- (2) The cause pervades all the effects whereas the effect is finite and limited in space.
- (3) The cause exists in all periods of time whereas the effect is subject to birth and death.
- (4) The cause has independent existence whereas the effect has a dependent existence.

In Sanskrit, the name given to the cause is *Satyam* and the effect is said to be *Mithya*.

Having noted the four main features of the cause-effect relationship, we have to look for that which fulfills that condition in this creation. To search or arrive at Brahman, we should try to find out that which fulfills these conditions. Something that is everywhere, something that is eternal, and something that is one. What is that?

If we take any one of your physical bodies, or any objects of the world we find that it is non-eternal, it is limited and it is located. From the smallest atom to the biggest star. However, the Upanishad says that there is something.

When we appreciate anything, we say statements such as there is a house, there is a person, there is a car, or there is a star. What is common to all these statements is “IS”. You are appreciating everything in creation as the existing entity. Thus, the existence seems to be something I appreciate everywhere. Do I appreciate anything that is non-existent? No. Therefore Upanishad says that which is everywhere, that which is eternal and that which is one is **Existence**.

My change in perspective should be that I no longer look upon the world as the world but I look upon it as Brahman. This change of attitude or perspective should be the benefit of knowledge. A cognitive change should bring about a perspective change. A perspective change should bring about an attitudinal change and an attitudinal change will bring about a change in our very life. This transformation is samsara to moksha. This transformation has only taken place because I have displaced the world vision by Brahman vision. Like displacing the table vision with the wood vision or displacing the wave vision with water vision.

As long as the vision is of the pot, ornament or wave, the vision is of mortality, when the wave vision is changed to water vision, I do not see mortality because wave comes and goes but water never comes and goes. When I see the wave, I see mortality; when I see water, I see immortality; when I see the pot, I see mortality. When I see clay, I see immortality because even when the pot is broken, the clay continues. The displacement of the world vision with Brahman vision is displacement of vision of mortality by the vision of immortality. Moksha is not going to some place. Moksha is not the accomplishment of any new thing. Moksha is nothing but a change in my vision (world vision replaced by Brahman vision) born out of knowledge.

The methodology

This is the basic method of the Vedic teachings and has been used by Vedic teachers since the beginning of time. Since this methodology is very important we should understand how it works. This change in vision takes place in four stages. Let us use the example of a wooden table. Everybody starts with the table vision of ‘here is a table’.

Stage 1: Presentation of the table as an effect

The first stage of the process is that the table is presented as a product or an effect.

Stage 2: Presentation of wood as the cause.

If the table is an effect then it should have a cause as all effects have a cause. I therefore say that the cause of the table is wood.

Stage 3: Negation of the table as separate from wood.

Once you have learned to see the wood, you are asked if there is a table other than wood. Tell me the weight of the wood and the table? You know that the whole weight of the table is the weight of the wood alone. There is no such substance called table. There is no table other than wood. Table is only a word. It has a nominal verbal existence. There is no such thing as table.

Stage 4: Negation of the cause 'status' of the wood.

Once you negate the table, the wood can no longer be called the cause, because the word cause is only relevant, valid or meaningful when you accept the effect. The word 'wood' is only relevant as long as you accept the word 'table'. Once you negate the table, the cause is negated and the wood can no longer be called the cause. The cause-effect relationship requires two things. The cause-effect relationship can only exist in a state of duality. We have negated duality therefore the table has gone and the wood can no longer be called the cause. I need to negate the status of 'cause' from the wood. When I do that, I am left with only one wood, which is beyond cause and effect. Wood alone was, wood alone is and wood alone will be. Wood being non-dual there is no two things.

This is the ultimate vision of Vedanta derived by this method. In the first two stages, we present and in the last two stages we negate. This should now be extended to the world.

Presentation of the world as an effect

Presentation of Brahman as the cause.

Negation of the world as separate from Brahman.

Negation of the causal status of Brahman.

Therefore, there is only one Brahman that is neither cause nor effect. We cannot use cause-effect because in non-duality, you cannot discuss reality. My vision has now changed to:

There was Brahman; there is Brahman; there will be Brahman.

There is no question of creating anything. There is no question of destroying anything. Previously Brahman was with one type of name and form and now Brahman is with another type of name and form. The wood originally in plank form became the wood in table form. The wood alone was there. It is only the form that is different.

Where do we commit a mistake and stray away from teachings? Previously I saw wood as plank alone. Then the wood was converted into varieties of furniture. I know that they are all nothing but wood but I have found that if I retain the word wood, for all furniture, I will have communication problems. For this reason, I introduced words such as table, chair or desk. I start using that word and after some time, I conclude that table is a substance. It is a wooden table.

This is the height of delusion. When I say, “this is a wooden table”, what is the noun and what is the adjective? Table is the noun and the word ‘wooden’ is the adjective. When I say “a tall man”, the word ‘man’ is the noun and the word ‘tall’ is the adjective. Which is the substantial entity? ‘Man’ the noun is substantial and ‘tall’ the adjective is non-substantial. We all know from our experience that noun is substantial and adjective is non-substantial.

Now let’s get back to the wooden table. The table is the noun and wood has become the adjective. What has happened? The table being the noun now becomes substantial and wooden as the adjective now becomes non-substantial in my intellect. I have reversed the non-substantial table to be substantial and the substantial wood to be non-substantial. I have given table the status of a noun and have given wood the status of an adjective. This is the delusion. Really speaking we should not be saying ‘wooden table’ we should say ‘tabley wood’. The table should be taken as the non-substantial adjective name/form and wood should be taken as the substantial noun.

But we reverse the noun as the adjective and the adjective as the noun. This reversal of noun and adjective, even though it appears as a language problem, becomes a thinking problem because your language reveals your thinking. Thinking problem is a perspective problem; perspective problem is an attitudinal problem; attitudinal problem is samsara. Therefore, we should not take a language mistake for granted. Let us retain the language but we should not make the mistake inside. Let us say wooden table but let us remember that the wood is the substance and the table is the non-substantial name and form. Similarly, let us use the world, but remember that the world is non-substantial name and form and the substance is Brahman alone.