Advaita Vedanta from a New Perspective

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Introduction

The phrase 'new perspective' used in the title needs explanation. What is meant is that there can be a non-traditional outlook on Advaita Vedanta. Nowadays, Vedanta, even Advaita Vedanta, is being studied on a large scale and this interest is not limited only to India. So many speakers from different parts of the world project wonderful notions and ideas from different angles. But there are also a few who, due to a lack of proper understanding of Advaita Vedanta, misinterpret it and dish up some strange ideas. So I thought I should speak about this subject along traditional as well as non-traditional lines.

What is 'unreal'?

Whenever someone speaks about Advaita Vedanta, this world is described as 'unreal'. But what does the word 'unreal' mean in this context? This is a big question. According to our traditional Advaitic or non-dual viewpoint, *Brahma satyam jagat mithyā*, only Brahman is real and the world unreal. Now the question is, are we all unreal? Is this universe unreal? What does this mean really? However, before going into that subject, I would like to touch upon the history of Advaita Vedanta briefly. Many people ask: Who propounded the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta? Was it Acharya Shankara? Not necessarily, because Advaita, Vishishtādvaita and Dvaita and also the philosophies of other schools were all present, before Shankara. There were many ways of looking at reality. In the '*Nāsadiya Suktam*' we have this idea:

> *Nāsadāsinno sadāsit tadānim nāsidrajo novyomā paro yat /*
> *Kimāvarivah kuha kasya sharmannamvah kimāsid gahanam gabhiram //*
> *Na mrityurāsidamritam na tahi na rātryā ahna āsit praketah /*
> *Ānidvātam svadhayā tadekam tasmādhānyanna parah kim canās //*

Swamiji in his 'The Hymn of Creation' has translated the lines quoted above thus:

> Existence was not then, nor non-existence,
> The world was not, the sky beyond was neither.
> What covered the mist? Of whom was that?
> What was in the depths of darkness thick?
>
> Death was not then, nor immortality,
> The night was neither separate from day,
> But motionless did *That* vibrate
> Alone, with Its own glory one—
> Beyond *That* nothing did exist.
>
> (*CW*, Vol. 6, p. 178)

That is to say, in the initial stage of projection of the universe there was only the Supreme Brahman or Ātman; there was only the non-dual Reality. That is what the Advaitins say. In the Upanishad we also find reference to the visible (*vyakta*) and the non-visible (*avyakta*) forms of Brahman.

Later on we come to the *Prasthāna-traya* of which one was the *Bhagavad-Gitā*. But prior to the *Gitā* and the Upanishads, we had the *Brahmasutras*. And later on we have the commentators.

The general notion is that Bhagavān Shankaracharya wrote commentaries on the *Prasthāna-traya* and established Advaita Vedanta on a firm ground. This is the traditional view. Undoubtedly the main act of Shankara was the establishment of Advaita Vedanta on a firm footing and for that he had to fight a lot with the opposing schools. For example, there were the dualists. There were people who did all sorts of sacrifices; they thought that was the only way to attain *svarga* or heaven. Then, there were the Sāmkhyas and the Buddhists. Shankara, within his short span of life, had to defend Vedanta and especially Advaita Vedanta by arguing with them. That is his greatness.

Secondly, there is an idea that Shankaracharya was a crypto-Buddhist. We have all heard that he allegedly accepted some of the ideas of Buddhism. As we all know, there were four important Buddhist schools: *Vaibhāshika*, *Sautrāntika*, *Yogāchāra*, and *Mādhyamika* or *Shunyavādin*. It is presumed by some scholars that Shankara might have taken some of his ideas from *Shunyavādi* Buddhism. The *Vaibhāshikas* hold that what you see outside is not imaginary, but real or solid. The *Sautrāntikas*, on the contrary, say the things that you see outside are not there. These are all imaginary—*anumeyatam*. The idea of the *Yogāchāra* Buddhists that nothing is there outside and that you are only imagining things was taken up later by the phenomenologists in the late 19th century who also say that the external idea is not there. Suppose, you see this table. By the time the process takes place it goes inside, it is already history. Similarly, things outside are *shunya*. Then came Nagarjuna, the *Shunyavādi* Buddhist philosopher. Standing on the solid earth, he declared *sarvashunyatā*.

Therefore, many scholars think that Shankara accepted these ideas and developed his theory. But we all know that Buddhism is considered to be a *nāstika darshana*, because it does not accept the Vedas which consider Brahman to be the ground of everything. If somebody says there is no basis, no ground Reality as such, they are *nāstikas*. Hence, the Charvakas are *nāstikas*; the Bouddhas are *nāstikas*. From this viewpoint Shankara was an *āstika* who based his philosophy on the Vedas. So, historically, Advaita was already there before the advent of Shankara; only he established the Advaita philosophy on a firm rational ground.

Now we come to the important idea of what exactly Shankara said. The common notion is that Shankara said 'Oh, this world is unreal.' But did Shankara really say this? If we consider his *Brahmasutra Bhāshya* as the standard, he said in the beginning:

> *yushmadasmat*
> *pratyayagocarayorvishaya-*
> *vishayinostamah prakāshavad-*
> *viruddhasvabhavayoritaretarabhāvānupa-*
> *pattau siddhyāyām....*

The false binary of 'you' and 'I'

He never said everything is unreal. He said, *yushmad asmat* are two things. What does that mean? There is something called 'I', there is something called 'you'. This 'you' may be this world or this body itself. So there are two. But why is the mistake happening? We are mistaking 'you' for 'me' and 'me' for 'you'—*Itaretara bhāvānupapattau siddhyāyām*. Even though

we know that you cannot be I, or I cannot be you, we are confusing them. This *adhyāsa* is the problem of wrong knowledge. Shankara is saying that there is a confusion. You confuse 'I' with 'you', 'you' with 'I'. The question is, what is this 'I'? Most of us do not know the answer. So we say this body is 'I'. But actually when we go deeper we see that, that is not 'I'. Shankara was exactly saying that. Secondly, Shankara wrote in his commentary on the fourth chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gitā*:

> *...tat na nausthasya nāvi gacchantyām tatastheshu agatishu nageshu pratikulagatidarshanāt dureshu cakshushā asamnikrishteshu gacchatsu gatyabhāvadarshanāt...*

Shankara says, a person travelling by a boat in the evening sees stationary trees on the bank of a river going backwards. He sees above and sees the stars which are actually moving very fast as stationary. Shankara says, this is born out of wrong perception. Similarly, such wrong perception deludes us into thinking that I am the body which actually is not true. Action belongs to the body and the organs. Yet we superimpose actions on the actionless, unchanging Self.

Shankaracharya also points out in his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gitā* that when one says everything is *avidyā*, the opponent will then ask: '*avidyā kasya*?' (Whose is this ignorance?) Shankara replies: '*yasya drishyate tasya eva*'. (To whom it appears thus). So it is only an individual-oriented universe. Shankara's main thrust and concern is that the idea of false ego has to be removed. That is the central point of Advaita Vedanta. The main thing is that the false ego is unreal. When this false ego goes, our confusion about this world also goes away.

Māyā

We are in a world of Māyā. We say, *Brahma satyam jagat mithyā.* But what is this *mithyā*? The word *mithyā* has been traditionally translated as 'unreal'. But it is not unreal, it is *relative*. It means, everything is real when you are seeing it, later on it changes. The famous example is that of the rope and the snake. There is a piece of rope in a dark place and you think it is a snake. Then you bring in a lamp and find that it is not what you took it to be. What happened here? Actually, when you saw the snake, you saw a relative truth. But when you see Brahman only and nothing else, then you are seeing the ground reality. So everything is time-bound relativity. That is what Shankara said.

To find the Absolute Reality

So Advaita or Shankara teaches us to go to that Reality. This experiential world is all relative, not unreal; it is relative, because it is subject to *desha* and *kāla*—space and time.

Even physicists today say that what we call 'solid' is not solid at all. When you press this table and think that it is a solid table, what is happening is that the atoms here are being pressed and these atoms are resisting, which is why you feel its solidity. Otherwise, everything is just space. Again, what you call empty space is also not really empty; it is thin matter. There is matter. Shankara wanted to say only this. So what is Advaita according to Shankara? Everything except Brahman is relative. Therefore, Shankara says, you must search who you are. Not just Shankara, but our Upanishadic scriptures also ask us to find out our true identity, who we are essentially.

You know the famous story to be found in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* (III.i-vi) where Bhrigu approaches his father Varuna and

says, 'I want to know Brahman. Oh revered sir, please teach me.' Varuna says in reply, 'Try to know that from which all beings take birth, and, that by which they live after being born.' The boy goes to the jungle and sits in meditation. After some time he comes back to his father, and says, 'I understand that *anna* or food is Brahman.' 'No, go back.' After many days the boy comes back and says: '*prāna*' is Brahman. 'No, go back.' He goes and comes back with the idea, '*manobrahmeti*'—the mind is Brahman. I am because I think. 'No, go deeper, do much more research.' Finally when he comes back, his face is glowing. He does not say a word. The father or the guru realizes that the boy has come to know that Reality. That is to say he has realized that bliss is Brahman—'*Ānando brahmeti vyajānāt*.' The dualist goes by the path of *bhakti*, to reach the same Reality, and calls it God. The Advaitin is told to go through the path of negation to arrive at Truth.

Relevance of Advaita in modern times

Now the next important question is: In what way is Advaita relevant to modern times? All will agree that the world has changed completely after the emergence of computer. During the 1960s and 1970s when the computer was new, it had many limitations. Then something else came. We call it Internet. With its help we started using the same computer in a different and better way, but the instrument is still necessary. Internet is called *āntarjāla* in Sanskrit. It is just like the *māyājāla*. What is this *māyājāla?* We consider everything there to be permanent, solid, and real.

Not only according to the Vedantist, but also according to the physicists, everything in this phenomenal world is not exactly real, but relative. Relative in what sense? It is not unreal, but relative. Relative means now it is there, now it is not. That is important to remember. Brahman is described as *satyam*. *Satyam*, in the sense of Being, is the Reality, the Absolute. They say, it is *trikālavādhitam*. It was so in the past, it is so in the present, and it will remain so in the future. It is one Absolute Reality, call It Brahman or by any other name. The rest are all subject to time. Maybe a tree is there for a hundred years, a plant is there for ten days, maybe the snake we saw in rope remains for one second. But this time also is very little, compared to trillions and trillions of years that are there in us. So everything other than the Absolute is relative. Our mistake is that we consider everything to be solid, permanent and hold onto that, including our false ego. So we must give up that.

Now coming back to computer again. When internet came we started using more of this computer. Then we had laptop. Now we have the mobile phone etc. You need not sit all the time before your computer or laptop. There is something called ubiquitous computing or pervasive intelligence. You are sleeping on your cot. Your fridge sees that there are no eggs but guests are coming. It will order for eggs. So everything is now interconnected. Already in the United States, there are driverless cars. This is the internet of things. Now this is being developed very fast and big companies are investing billions and billions of dollars on this technology. Then, there is the augmented reality, which is the next stage. What is this augmented reality? Suppose you go to a shop, you want to buy a sofa for your house. The sofa part is real. What you do is that you take a picture of the sofa, you change the background of your house, of your room, window, etc. and see how it looks there. When it does not look good, you take

another sofa. The sofa part is real. The background is unreal. So this is augmented reality. That is becoming very real now and companies are all using this technology. In many countries computers are doing farming. A gentleman came to our Holland Centre some time ago. He said, the main problem here is to keep changing the password as quickly and as frequently as possible because if some error happens or if somebody hacks it, the robot will cut off all the trees and instead of planting, it will remove everything!

Then there is one more thing which is called 'virtual reality'. This is still more amazing, still more magical. You go to some place. There are many parks and zoos. You are sitting with your child. Suddenly, a penguin comes and jumps on you, splashing water. You jump up in fear, but there is neither the penguin nor water!

Why I say all this is because we are just putting up more and more nets around us. In the language of Advaita, it is Māyā. Already we are caught in this one net so that we cling to the fake idea that everything is solid and permanent. But along with that, we are spinning additional nets. It is as if a tiger wants to escape, but it is not allowed to escape. They put one net, then another, then another and it is captured. This is what our situation is like. Suppose you think you will reject this internet of things, this augmented reality, this virtual reality, etc. But can you really?

Finally, there is something more coming now. That is AI or Artificial Intelligence. This is another universe that we are creating for ourselves. A professor from a certain university and her husband, both of whom are doing wonderful work in the field of AI, came to our Centre to discuss something. They asked 'Is this Artificial Intelligence not God?' Actually they claim it is God because they can create anything with the help of AI. I allowed them to talk. They said, 'Whatever you can think of you can do; God is not necessary anymore. AI is God and makers of AI are also gods, for they are capable of creating a new world.'

First I allowed them to talk. Then I told the gentleman and his wife: 'Very good that you consider yourselves to be gods; but where are you doing all this? On this earth, created by somebody whom we call God. Why don't you go out of this universe completely, even leaving this body, and create your own world, your own things?' Suppose I go to somebody's house and then draw a picture of that house and say, 'Listen, this is my house because I have drawn the picture.' He will say, 'You are mad. You sit in my house, use my pen and paper and draw my house and say it is yours? It cannot be.' Similarly, AI, or whatever it is, is not God. What we call internet of things is all data. What you feed will come back. *There is no original intelligence* though they claim that robots have original intelligence. In 17th or 18th century things were simpler as there was no internet of things. Now things have become complex. We have added and still go on adding more of nets to bind ourselves. We are in a world of Māyā. First, we have to overcome this Māyā and realize that the world we are in is another Māyā created by *avidyā* or *adhyāsa* and then go back to the Reality. Therefore this study of Advaita Vedanta is very much relevant and important to us today.

How does Advaita Vedanta help us get out of this net? It simply asks us to find out who we are really. That is all. Swami Vivekananda's remarkable utterance is, 'Each soul is potentially divine'. Until and unless we are awakened and touch in some way that intrinsic divinity, we remain bound by Māyā. However strong we may be, this

Māyā or cosmic illusion will not leave us. We cannot brush aside this as our mind takes all perishable things to be permanent. In the *Mahabharata* we encounter that famous question which Yaksha asked Dharmaraja Yudhishthira, 'What is the greatest mystery of this world?' He replied, 'People see that everything is passing; still they consider everything to be permanent.'

For us, this world of gross experience is real, is solid, while Ātman is unreal because we do not know anything about that. We do not know what we really are. It is like our coat and pant travelling around the city and saying, 'I am this man'. Is not such a claim ridiculous? We are doing exactly that, not knowing the Reality, our true identity. We confuse that Reality with our false ego. Therefore, Advaita Vedanta had proclaimed in the past and will continue to declare even after a hundred thousand years that there is only one hope of escaping the snares of Māyā and that is by holding on to our inner reality. When we do that, in Swamiji's words, 'Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.' Swamiji says, all power is within Ātman. So what we have to do in this world of relativity or Māyā is to think that we are something different from these fleeting things. We must accept that they are all time-bound. Therefore, while Shankaracharya gave the philosophical basis of relativity, Albert Einstein provided the mathematical one.

Swami Vivekananda says 'Māyā is a statement of fact'. Statement of fact means, you see certain things and they are there at that moment. That's all. In time they are there, but the Absolute is beyond time. And that Absolute is the Reality which does not change with time. And that Absolute is called Brahman. Brahman is not God as you know. It is unlimited or infinite. Everything else is relative.

'Remove the tree'

Recently a scientist who worked in NASA for many years has written a book called *God Theory*. In *God Theory* he mentions what he thinks of Advaita. According to him, Māyā is just cutting off the light which is the Absolute. He says, suppose you are sitting near the window of your house. The window is open, there is bright sunlight outside. But since there is a tree directly opposite to it, you do not see the sun or if you see it, it is only partial. The author says, this is called Māyā. When the Advaitists tell you to go to the Absolute, they, in fact, say 'remove that tree'. So what you think as permanent is not permanent at all.

We remember a wonderful thing that happened in the life of Swamiji. Sri Ramakrishna was telling the devotees that everything is Brahman—the pot, the jar, even the broomstick. Swamiji heard it—the pot is Brahman, the jar is Brahman—but was not convinced. Sri Ramakrishna then touched Swamiji, and Vivekananda lost his outward consciousness and saw both the Absolute and the relative. What is that Absolute? That which will never change. The relative reality keeps on changing. What was there fifty years ago or hundred years ago is no longer there. It has changed. Swamiji could see both the Absolute and the relative at the same time.

According to the Buddhists, *sarvam duhkham*, *sarvam kshanikam*. Those of us who came here one hour ago are completely different now. According to the Advaita vedantist, it is *vivarta*. That is the word they use. *Vivarta* means *brahma vivarta*. It is actually Absolute, but we are seeing It as

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