

Advaita Vedanta (IAST *Advaita Vedānta*; Sanskrit अद्वैत वेदान्तः;

A sub-school of the Vedānta (literally, *end or the goal of the Vedas*, Sanskrit) school of Hindu philosophy, numbers with *Dvaita* and *Viśiṣṭādvaita* as major sub-schools of Vedānta. *Advaita* (literally, *non-duality*) often has been called a **monistic** system of thought. The word "Advaita" essentially refers to the identity of the Self (Atman) and the Whole (**Brahman**).^[1] The key source texts for all schools of Vedānta, which is one of the six orthodox (āstika) Hindu philosophies (darśana), include the Prasthanatrayi—the canonical texts consisting of the **Upanishads**, the **Bhagavad Gita**, and the Brahma Sutras.

Advaita Vedanta is the oldest extant sub-school of Vedānta. Although its roots trace back to the first millennium B.C.E., the most prominent exponent of the Advaita Vedanta is considered by tradition to be the eighth century scholar **Adi Shankara** (700-750 C.E.). He created Advaita Vedanta through reflection on the basic Hindu texts, **Upanishads**, the **Bhagavad Gita**, and the Brahma Sutras. Shankara's founding of Advaita Vedanta upon classical Hindu texts accounts, in part, for the longevity of his branch of **Hinduism**. Another reason for the longevity and vitality of Advaita Vedanta lay in the need fulfilled by the theology and philosophy.

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Shankara introduced a monistic thought, referred to as non-dualistic. Basically, he contented, based upon Hindu scriptures, that **Brahmin** (Whole) and Self (**Atman**) are the same. No difference or distinction exists between Atman and Brahmin. That is a difficult, and profound, position to defend. Yet Shankara set forth a reasonable system that has stood the test of time. He argued that Brahmin is the only truth, the world is illusion, and that reality is three-tiered. At the third tier, all existence is one. Advaita's greatest contribution is serving as a bridge between the rationalistic (jnana) yoga and the devotional (bhakti) yoga, the yoga of ordinary people.

Shankarayacharya consolidated the Advaita Vedanta, an interpretation of the Vedic scriptures approved and accepted by Gaudapada and Govinda Bhagavatpada siddhānta (system). Continuing the line of thought of some of the Upanishadic teachers, and also that of his own teacher's teacher Gaudapada, (Ajativada), Adi Shankara expounded the doctrine of Advaita—a nondualistic reality.

He wrote commentaries on the Prasthana Trayi. A famous quote from Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, one of his ***Prakarana gramthas*** (philosophical treatises) that succinctly summarizes his philosophy is:^[2]

Brahma satyaṃ jagat mithyā, jīvo brahmaiva nāparah — **Brahman** is the only truth, the world is illusion, and there is ultimately no difference between Brahman and individual self.

In his [metaphysics](#), three tiers of reality exist with each one negating the previous. The category *illusion* in that system amounts to unreal only from the viewpoint of the absolutely real, different from the category of the *absolutely unreal*. His system of vedanta introduced the method of critical study on the accepted metaphysics of the Upanishads, all the later vedanta schools adopting that style. His refusal to literally use scriptural statements, rather adopting symbolic interpretation where he considered it appropriate, represents another distinctive feature of his work.

Adi Shankara made crucial contributions to Advaita, especially the commentaries on the *Prasthanatrayi* (Brahma Sūtras, Bhagavad Gītā, the [Upaniṣads](#)) and the *Gaudapadiya Karikas*. He also wrote a major independent treatise, called Upadeśa Sāhasrī, expounding his philosophy.

Salient features of Advaita Vedanta

Three levels of truth. According to Advaita Vedanta, three levels of truth exist: 1) The transcendental or the Pāramārthika level with Brahman as the only reality and nothing else. 2) The pragmatic or the Vyāvahārika level where both Jiva (living creatures or individual souls) and [Ishvara](#) are true. The material world is completely true. And, 3) The apparent or the Prātibhāsika level where even material world reality is actually false, like illusion of a snake over a rope or a dream.

Brahman. According to Adi Shankara, God, the Supreme Cosmic Spirit or Brahman is the One, the whole and the only reality. Other than Brahman, everything else, including the universe, material objects and individuals, are false. Brahman is at best described as that infinite, omnipresent, omnipotent, incorporeal, impersonal, transcendent reality, the divine ground of all Being.

Brahman is the origin of this and that, the origin of forces, substances, all of existence, the undefined, the basis of all, unborn, the essential truth, unchanging, eternal, the absolute and beyond the senses. Brahman dwells in the purest knowledge itself, illuminant like a source of infinite light. Due to ignorance (avidyā), the Brahman is visible as the material world and its objects. The actual Brahman is attributeless and formless (see Nirguna Brahman), the Self-existent, the Absolute and the Imperishable, indescribable.

Māyā. Māyā (/ma:ja:/) According to Adi Shankara, *Māyā* constitutes the illusionary power of Brahman that brings people to see the Brahman the material world of separate

forms. It has two main functions; to "hide" Brahman from ordinary human perception and to present the material world in its stead.

Status of the world. Adi Shankara says that the world is an illusion because of some logical reasons. Consider the following logical argument. A pen is placed in front of a mirror. One can see its reflection. To one's eyes, the image of the pen is perceived. Now, what should the image be called? It cannot be true, because it is an image. The truth is the pen. It cannot be false, because it is seen by our eyes.

Ishvara (literally, the Supreme Lord). According to Advaita Vedanta, when man tries to know the attributeless Brahman with his mind, under the influence of Maya, Brahman becomes the Lord. Ishvara is Brahman with Maya—the manifested form of Brahman. The Supreme Lord's actual form in the transcendental level is the Cosmic Spirit.

Ishvara is Saguna Brahman or Brahman with innumerable auspicious qualities. All-perfect, omniscient, omnipresent, incorporeal, independent, Creator of the world, Brahman acts as its ruler and also destroyer. Eternal and unchangeable, the material and the instrumental cause of the world, both immanent and transcendent, he may even have a personality.

Brahman is the source morality and giver of the fruits of one's [Karma](#). He himself is beyond sin and merit. He rules the world with his Maya. (His divine power). There is no place for a [Satan](#) or [devil](#) in Hinduism, unlike Abrahamic religions. Advaitins explain the misery because of ignorance.

Status of God. To think that there is no place for a personal God (Ishvara) in Advaita Vedanta is a misunderstanding of the philosophy. Ishvara is, in an ultimate sense, described as "false" because Brahman appears as Ishvara only due to the curtain of Maya. However, as described earlier, just as the world is true in the pragmatic level, similarly, Ishvara is also pragmatically true. Just as the world is not absolutely false, Ishvara is also not absolutely false. He is the distributor of the fruits of one's Karma. See, Karma in Hinduism for more information. In order to make the pragmatic life successful, it is very important to believe in God and worship him. In the pragmatic level, whenever we talk about Brahman, we are in fact talking about God. God is the highest knowledge theoretically possible in that level. Devotion (Bhakti) will cancel the effects of bad Karma and will make a person closer to the true knowledge by purifying his mind. Slowly, the difference between the worshiper and the worshiped decreases and upon true knowledge, liberation occurs.

Ātman. The soul or the self (Atman) is identical with Brahman, not a part of Brahman that ultimately dissolves into Brahman, but the whole Brahman itself. Atman, the silent

witness of all the modifications, stands free and beyond sin and merit, experiencing neither happiness nor pain because it is beyond the triad of Experiencer, Experienced and Experiencing, incorporeal and independent. When the reflection of atman falls on Avidya (ignorance), atman becomes *jīva*—a living being with a body and senses. Each jiva feels as if he has his own, unique and distinct Atman, called jivatman. The concept of jiva has truth only in the pragmatic level. In the transcendental level, only the one Atman, equal to Brahman, is true.

Salvation. Liberation or **Moksha** (akin to **Nirvana** of the Buddhists)—Advaitins also believe in the theory of **reincarnation** of souls (Atman) into plants, animals and humans according to their **karma**. They believe that suffering arises from Maya, and only knowledge (called Jnana) of Brahman can destroy Maya. Maya removed, ultimately Jiva-Atman and the Brahman are the same. Such a state of bliss, when achieved while living, goes by the term Jivan mukti.

Theory of creation. Adi Shankara believes in the Creation of the world through Satkaryavada. Samkhya teaches a sub-form of *Satkaryavada* called Parinamavada (evolution) whereby the cause really becomes an effect. The Supreme Lord Ishvara created the universe from a viewpoint of the sense. Maya represents Ishvara divine magic, with the help of which Ishvara creates the world.

The Upanishads sets for the order of Creation. First of all, Ishvara creates the five subtle elements (ether, air, fire, water and earth). Maya creates Ether. Air arises from ether. Fire, arises from air. Water arises from fire, earth from water. From a proportional combination of all five subtle elements, the five gross elements come into creation. From those elements, the universe and life derive. Destruction follows the reverse order.

Status of ethics. Ethics has a firm place in Advaita; the same place as the world and God. Ethics, which implies doing good Karma, indirectly helps in attaining true knowledge. The Shruti (the Vedas and the Upanishads) constitute the basis of merit and sin. Dharma infuses truth, non-violence, service of others, and pity while adharma (sin) infuses lies, violence, cheating, selfishness, and greed.

The impact of Advaita

Advaita rejuvenated much of Hindu thought and also spurred debate with the two main theistic schools of Vedanta philosophy formalized later: Vishishtadvaita (qualified nondualism), and **Dvaita** (dualism). Advaita further helped to merge the old Vedic religion with popular south-Asian cults/deities, thus making a bridge between higher types of practice (such as jnana yoga) and devotional religion of ordinary people.