



EXPLORING ADI SHANKARACHARYA'S ADVAITA VEDANTA IN RELATION TO OTHER TRADITIONS AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S PRACTICAL APPROACH TO VEDANTA.

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Abstract

Adi Shankaracharya, a Nambudiri Brahmin born in Kerala, India, was not just a proponent but a master of a philosophy of non-dualism called Advaita. His brilliance as a scholar and luminary was evident in his vociferous debates on various philosophical topics in the 8th century. Shankaracharya's Vedanta, known as Advaita or non-dualism, is pure, simple, and lucid. Hence, it is sometimes referred to as Kevala-Advaita or unqualified monism. Madhva's dualistic approach, Dvaita Vedanta, contrasts with Adi Shankaracharya's non-dualistic Advaita Vedanta, highlighting the diverse perspectives within Vedanta. Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, or qualified non-dualism, offers a middle path between dualism and non-dualism, demonstrating the richness of Vedantic thought. Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna Paramhansa Dev, introduced a practical approach to Advaita Vedanta. His life and work have recently attracted renewed attention, especially after his plenary address at the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893.

This study delves into Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta, compares various Vedanta traditions, and explores Swami Vivekananda's concept of the importance of applying Advaita Vedanta in daily life, encouraging individuals to realize their true nature as the ultimate reality (Brahman) and manifesting the divinity within.

Keywords: *Adi Shankaracharya, Swami Vivekananda, Advaita Vedanta, Synthesis of Yoga, Brahman, Religion, Brahma Sutra, Divinity.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Vedanta:

The word Vedanta means the 'end of Vedas.' *Veda* = texts; *anta* = end or Siddhanta, the final ultimate conclusions or the highest teachings. Therefore, Vedanta is a philosophy based on the Upanishads. It is the heart, deep-rooted philosophy of Hinduism. The main goal of Vedanta is to achieve liberation from all forms of suffering, also known as Moksa. The texts of the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Brahma Sutras form the triple canon (prasthanatrayi) of Advaita Vedanta, which serves as the foundation for Vedanta.

Advaita Vedanta is a compilation of teachings primarily based on scriptures that are not of human origin. These scriptures reveal a reality that anyone who follows the discipline and logic



can universally and experientially verify. Classical Vedanta recognizes three "points of departure" (prasthanaya traya) for its philosophy: a method or canonical system. The triple canonical sources of Vedanta are the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Brahma Sutras.

- *UPANISHAD Sruti-Prasthanaya* -the essence of Vedic Knowledge, forming the primary authoritative source of the canonical base of experience.
- *BHAGAVAD GITA Smriti-Prasthanaya* is the secondary authoritative source, a canonical base of revelation, and a guide to a practical life of righteousness.
- *BRAHMA SUTRAS Nyaya Prasthanaya* is the canonical base of reasoning, a collection of 555 sutras from the Upanishads that provide solutions to various unanswered questions from the Upanishads.

The concept of *tat tvam asi*(That Thou Art) is the foundation of Adi Shankara's Advaita Vedanta. This concept translates to *I am Brahman*. According to Adi Shankara, *tat* refers to - Brahman, the Existence. *Tvam* -refers to one's real I, the inner self, the direct witness free from caste, family, and ceremonies: the Atma.

Tat tvam asi refutes the concept of Atma being separate from Brahman. Thus, the non-duality of Atman and Brahman, knowledge, and realization are the core of Adi Shankara's Advaita Vedanta.

The teachings of Adi Shankara can be summarized in the below verse:

“Brahma Satyam Jagan Mithya Jivo Brahmaiva Na Aparah-Brahman”

Brahman (the Absolute) is alone real; this world is unreal; and the Jiva or the individual soul is non-different from Brahman. The ultimate knowledge and realization that you, the Atman, are one with Brahman, God. The uniqueness of Advaita lies in the culmination of the self-inquiry approach of personal existence vs. the God-centered approach.

1.2 Adi Shankaracharya- a visionary of Advaita Tradition:

Shri Adi Shankara Bhagavatpada, who belonged to the Kerala tradition, lived around 788-820 CE and wrote a commentary on Brahma Sutra - the Brahma Sutra Bhasya, which is considered to be the foundation of Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Gaudapada was the first systematic exponent of this philosophy; Shankara refined, adorned, and preached it to the masses in a language laden with clarity and simplicity. Additionally, he authored 23 books on the fundamentals of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy and composed 73 devotional and meditative hymns.

Adi Shankaracharya's contribution to the world and Hinduism is profound, unparalleled, and marked with pristine clarity. “*Prasannagambhira*” is the Sanskrit word used to describe the



vastness & simplicity of his knowledge and contribution to Advaita Vedanta. Gaudapadacharya and Adi Shankara presented Advaita Vedanta as an interconnected, structured & coherent philosophy. The Ishavasya Upanishad is the 40th chapter of Shukla Yajur Veda, consisting of Adi Shankara’s Bhashya, was revolutionary as he focused on the authority and strength of Vedas as opposed to Purva Mimansa Sutras(ca.300–200 BCE), written by Rishi Jaimini that dealt with Vedic rituals and their justifications. Adi Shankara's Brahma Sutra Bhasya is a fundamental text of the Vedanta school of Hinduism and is considered awe-inspiring among both Eastern and Western Philosophical Literature.

2. A Comparison of Vedantic Traditions:

The various founders of the different Vedanta schools present their basic works as commentaries on traditional sources.

Tradition	Guru/ Scholar	State	Brahman (Ultimate Reality)	Jagat (World)	Atma (Self)	Moksha (Liberation)
Advaita Non-dualism	<i>Shri Adi Shankara Bhagavatpa da ((788 - 820 A.D.)</i>	<i>Kerala</i>	<i>Nirguna No attributes</i>	<i>Mithya Unreal</i>	<i>Abheda Non- separate</i>	<i>Jnanam Knowledge</i>
	<i>Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902)</i>	<i>West Bengal</i>	<i>Infinite Existence, Infinite Knowledge and Infinite Bliss, sat- cit- ananda, nirguna & nirvivesa</i>	<i>Maya Reflection of one eternal being, various names and forms</i>	<i>consciousn ess, pure existence, free and blissful. sat-cit- ananda.</i>	<i>Synthesis, harmony, and balance of karma, bhakti, raja and jnana yoga</i>
Vishishta Advaita, Qualified No n-dualism	<i>Ramanuja (11th century)</i>	<i>Tamil Nadu</i>	<i>Saguna With Attributes Vishnu-</i>	<i>Satyam Real Jagat is a material, physical aspect of</i>	<i>Amsha Part</i>	<i>Prapatti Surrender to Lord Vishnu.</i>



			limitless power with infinite divine attributes; creator of the world & source of blessings	Vishnu.		
Dvaita	<i>Madhvacharya</i> (1197-1276)	<u>Karnataka</u>	<i>Vishnu</i> Personal God who is separate from the world and its beings	<i>Bheda</i> Separate 1. Difference between material things 2. Diff b/w material things & Atma 3. Diff b/w material things and Lord Vishnu.	<i>Bheda</i> Separate The inner self is a tiny part of the infinite Lord Vishnu. 1. Difference between each soul and Lord Vishnu 2. Difference between individual souls	<i>Anugraha</i> Grace Intense devotion that invokes Lord Vishnu's grace.

2.1 Adi Shankara Accepted

Adi Shankara's tradition of Advaita Vedanta emerged in Kerala and has been widely accepted, imbibed, and followed by The Ramakrishna order, headquartered in Belur Matha, West Bengal. Swami Vivekananda's Advaita is a continuation of the Vedantic doctrine of Adi Shankaracharya.

Action for welfare sans desire is like service to God, leading to freedom. This is where the Bhagavad Gita, Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda, and Adi Shankaracharya culminate in their



thoughts. The purpose behind the action is what matters. Liberation from the cycle of birth and death is Swami's goal: to awaken the realization that you are one with God; a significant similarity with Adi Shankara is the concept of “tat tvam asi”- *that thou art*. You are God himself, “you are divine.” Vivekananda's sayings include freedom, as depicted in the lines below:

“Both name and form are Âtman, ever free.
Know thou art That, Sannyâsin bold!”
(The Song of Sannyasin)

Advaita Vedanta is based on the belief that there is only one existence and one reality. Differences between things such as virtue vs. vice, strength vs. weakness, and good vs. bad are only a matter of degree, not kind, says Swami.

Adi Shankaracharya added a lost psalm to the Hindu scriptures in his analysis of Advaita Vedanta. His focus was on the application of a revival rooted in Upanishadic Advaita. Swami Vivekananda’s Advaita Vedanta applicability lies in realizing the Atman, the self, i.e. “*realize the divinity within*” through love, karma, bhakti, service, knowledge, philosophy (Jnana yoga), and meditation leading to liberation; books, temples, doctrines, and churches are secondary approaches.

2.2 Swami vs Shankara on Brahman

Advaitins emphasize *knowledge as the divinity within; Brahman is the foundation*; karma, bhakti, and yoga are the manifestations,

According to Śhankara, every individual is essentially a non-dual Brahman, possessing infinite, whole, and complete qualities. Liberation appears to be a future goal rather than a present reality due to the feeling of separation between oneself and Brahman, caused by the sense of finite identity. The solution is to recognize the non-dual consciousness within and shedding limited identities for true liberation.

Swamiji accepts this theory but advances it by manifesting divinity within and identifying the divinity in every jiva of the material world. While Shankara focuses on realizing the Brahman within through self-knowledge, ‘One becomes *Brahman simply by knowing Brahman.*’; Swamiji accepts Shankara’s Brahman, but this alone, Swamiji says, is not the path to liberation; all modes of work, worship, methods of struggle, and all modes of creativity are the path to freedom; finding peace and contentment internally and externally—is a whole-encompassing, practical, utilitarian approach to Advaita Vedanta. Swami says that realization alone is limiting and finite; *manifesting the realization in everyday life is the application of the Vedanta.*



3. Synthesis of Yoga

Swami emphasized synthesizing the four Yogas: Karma, Bhakti, Raja, and Jnana. Moving from selfishness to unselfishness is the foundation of Karma Yoga; Raj Yoga helps focus the mind. Jnana Yoga helps people transition from ignorance to knowledge. The synthesis of all Yogas is the path to God's realization.

3.1 Shankara:

Shankara believed that Karma Yoga purifies the mind, leading to righteousness. Karma is the foundation for chitta suddhi. Upasana, a combination of Bhakti and Raja Yoga, results in focus and concentration of the mind, leading to ultimate knowledge of the Brahman and the self in Jnana Yoga.

Problem	Solution	Method
Ignorance	Knowledge	Jnana Yoga
Unfocussed Minds	Focus	Bhakti; Upasana
Impure Mind	Pure Mind	Karma Yoga

(Swami Sarvapriyananda, 2023)

For Ramanujacharya, Karma Yoga is the foundation in the hierarchy concept of Yogas, but Bhakti Yoga- surrender to Narayana, is supreme and will lead to God's realization.

3.2 Vivekananda on Synthesis of Yoga:

Swami Vivekananda emphasizes synthesizing and harmonizing the four Yogas: Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Raja Yoga. He had no problem following one yoga as a path to realizing the Brahman, but he did propose the various perils of following one yoga singularly.

Harmony of the four yogas can be seen in the Ramakrishna Mission order emblem, which Swami drew at the Vedantic Society of New York, in 1894. The symbol of wavy waters symbolizes Karma Yoga; the lotus represents Bhakti Yoga; the rising sun -Jnana Yoga. The encircling serpent Raja Yoga and the awakened Kundalini Shakti. The Swan stands for Paramatman, the Supreme Self. The idea behind the emblem is that with the union of Karma and Yogas, one can achieve the Paramatman. The synthesis of Yogas is the foundation of Swami Vivekananda's Religion.



4. Swami Vivekananda on Religion- A Way to Practical Vedanta:

Each soul is potentially divine, according to Swami. The goal is to manifest the divinity within by controlling external and internal nature. This can be achieved through work, worship, psychic control, or philosophy. True religion is realizing all is one reality and seeing divinity in oneself and others. (Swami Vivekananda's Complete Works, Vol-4)

The concept of *manifest the divinity within* has a two-fold reality for Swami:

- i. Knowledge of realizing the self, the Brahman; '*I am Brahman.*'
- ii. Expression of thought, words, and speech leads to realization. It is a very Buddha-like realization. Buddha's nature of enlightenment is a two-fold realization process: -
 1. A Paradigm Shift: Realizing the intrinsic nature, in this case, *the Bodhi*; in Advaita Vedanta, the realization of '*I am Brahman*'—not the body, not the mind; existence witnesses' consciousness.
 2. Ethical Manifestation: Bodhi's intrinsic nature is unreserved compassion, perfect control of the senses, and limitless selflessness.

Therefore, the intrinsic divinity within can be manifested by practicing the harmony of the four yogas in everyday life, realizing the spirit of oneness, extending selfless service with unreserved compassion, and controlling the senses.

We must worship the living God, who is present in everything, including all men and women, sinners and saints, Brahmins and Pariahs, but especially in the poor, sick, ignorant, destitute, and downtrodden. The Vedanta proclaims that serving the Lord in these forms is an incredible privilege beyond measure. True worship of Siva is to see Him in the poor, weak, and diseased, not just in mere images.

(Thus Spake Vivekananda, 1975; The Neo Vedanta Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda)



Swami Vivekananda's synthesis of yoga is based on Sri Ramakrishna's "*Shiva Jnane Jiva Seva*" concept, which involves serving all beings and recognizing them as Shiva. Swami Vivekananda believed that having faith in oneself and God is the key to greatness. Through his interpretation of Vedanta, he proposed solutions to achieve its emancipation. Practicing the harmony of the four yogas in day-to-day life is the path to manifest the divinity within, says Swami. Selfless, unrelenting service, control of senses, and unreserved compassion for the poor and rich, the sick and the destitute, seeing Shiva in them all, is the only way to attain Moksha. This is the core of Swami Vivekananda's *Practical Vedanta*. This practicality of the Advaita Vedanta has a universal application in India and beyond.

5. Conclusion:

Śhankara's Advaita Vedanta is about strengthening the pillars of secularism, as evidenced in the Ram Mandir dispute case. Present Shankaracharya's effort of presenting documents for the Ram Mandir court case went in favor of the Hindus, and in 2024, the Ram Mandir stands tall. Romain Rolland sums up Swami Vivekananda's humanism thus: "*It was wonderful that he (Vivekananda) kept in his feverish hands to the end the equal balance between the two poles: a burning love of the Absolute (The Advaita) and the irresistible appeal of suffering humanity. And what makes him so appealing to us is that when equilibrium was no longer possible, and he had to make a choice, it was the latter that won the day.*" The oppressed, exploited, and tyrannized were Swami's Gods; the destitute and ignorant were his Siva." Swami Vivekananda's Advaita Vedanta is a practical and living philosophy that anyone, including atheists, can apply daily. It is based on the concepts of Advaita Vedanta, the harmonious synthesis of Yoga, & Ramakrishna Dev's teachings. On the other hand, Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta is more focused on strengthening the pillars of Hinduism, its revival & survival.



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