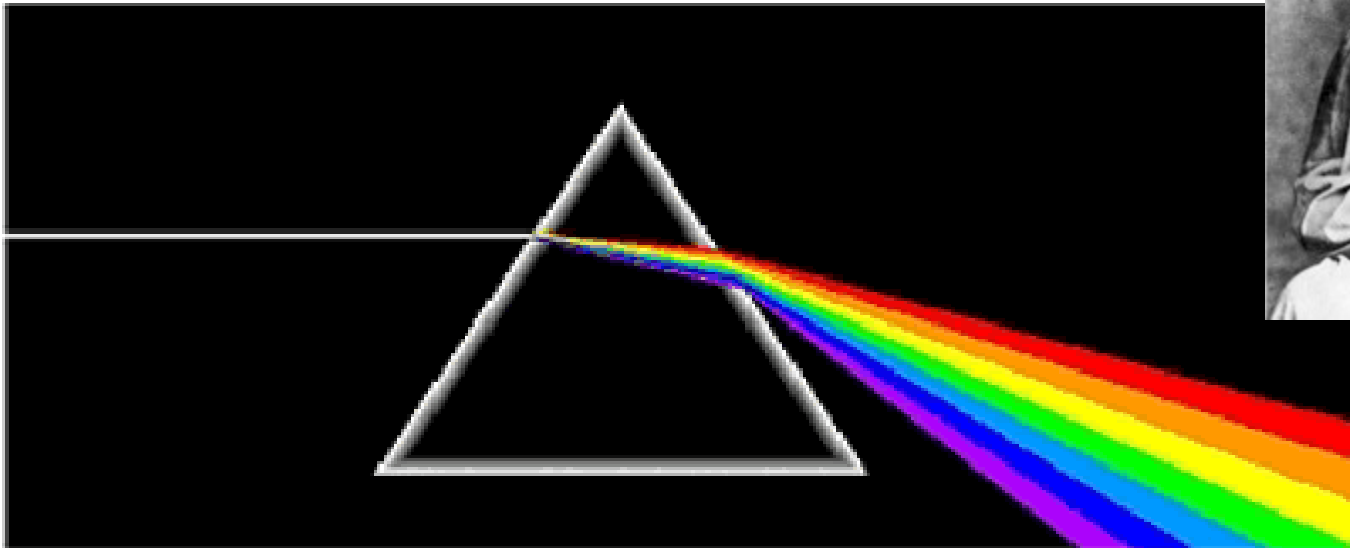


# Lecture 2: Vivekananda and Vedanta Philosophy



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# The meaning of “vedanta”

- The word vedanta can be split into two: veda and anta and literally means “end of the Vedas”.
  - Veda is derived from the root word vid which means “to know”.
  - ‘Vedanta’ should be taken to mean the distilling of the philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads into its essential components.
  - The Himalayan range of Upanishadic thought must be catalogued and classified so that we can comprehend it.
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# Vivekananda's view of Vedanta

- Just as the word 'science' does not refer to a specific subject, but rather to a method of understanding the physical world, Vivekananda views Vedanta as a method to understand both the internal world of the mind and consciousness and the external world of matter.
  - Thus, Vedanta includes science and all forms of human creative endeavor that represent attempts to comprehend infinity in its manifold forms.
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# Six systems of philosophy

- Nyaya, vaishesika, Samkhya, yoga, purva mimamsa and Vedanta.
- These translate as: logical realism, realistic pluralism, evolutionary dualism, disciplined meditation, preliminary interpretation of the Vedas, and synthesis of the Vedas, respectively.
- The systems correspond to the sutra period ranging from 200 CE to 600 CE.
- Early 19<sup>th</sup> century translations by European Indologists such as Max Muller had a Judeo-Christian coloring.

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# The three schools of Vedanta

- Vedanta itself is divided into three schools: dvaita, visistadvaita, and advaita, corresponding to dualism, qualified dualism and non-dualism.
  - The expansion of these schools belongs to the scholarly period: 600 CE to 1700 CE.
  - The principal exponents of these schools were Shankara (advaita), Ramanuja (visistadvaita), and Madhva (dvaita).
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# Ramakrishna and Vivekananda

- Learning from Ramakrishna the philosophy of ancient India, Vivekananda could distill and present the quintessence of Vedanta not as a catalogue of ideas, but rather as a practical system which each individual can apply in one's own life.



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# Christopher Isherwood on Ramakrishna

- Isherwood opens his book on Ramakrishna as follows:
  - “This is the story of a phenomenon.”
  - “I will begin by calling him simply that, rather than ‘holy man’, ‘mystic’, ‘saint’, or ‘avatar’; all emotive words with mixed associations which may attract some readers, repel others.
  - A phenomenon is often something extraordinary and mysterious.
  - Ramakrishna was extraordinary and mysterious; most of all to those who were best fitted to understand him.
  - A phenomenon is always a fact; an object of experience.”
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# Vivekananda on Ramakrishna

- “The time was ripe, it was necessary that such a man should be born, and he came; and the most wonderful part of it was, that his life’s work was just near a city which was full of Western thought –
  - a city which had run mad after these occidental ideas, a city which had become more European than any other city in India.
  - There he lived, without any book-learning whatsoever, this great intellect never learnt even to write his own name, but the most brilliant graduates of our university found in him an intellectual giant.
  - He was a strange man, this Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.”
-



# Letter to Alasinga



- In 1896, Vivekananda wrote, “to put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer startling psychology, a religion which shall be simple, popular, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds – is a task only those can understand who have attempted it.
- ... and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life’s work.”

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# Vedanta = the four yogas

- Jnana yoga (yoga of knowledge)
  - Karma yoga (yoga of work)
  - Bhakti yoga (yoga of devotion)
  - Raja yoga (yoga of psychic control)
  - The yogas are not independent, but are interdependent.
  - They exercise four faculties of the mind: thinking, willing, feeling and restraining.
  - What popular culture calls yoga is really hatha yoga and refers to stretching exercises for the physical body.
  - These yogas are exercises to stretch the powers of the mind.
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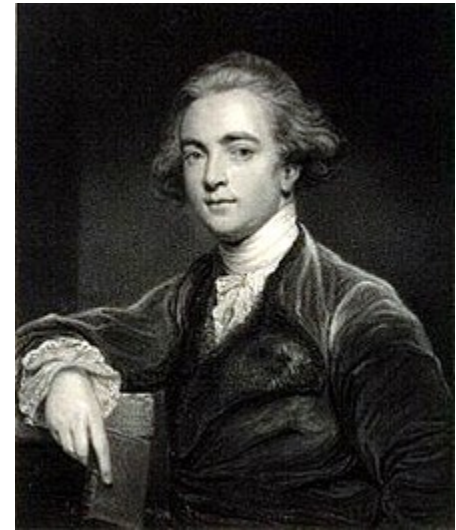
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# The word 'yoga'

- 'yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'yuj' which means 'to yoke'.
  - Often it means 'to join' or 'to unify', 'to integrate'.
  - The four faculties of the mind corresponding to thinking, feeling, willing and restraining are usually discordant.
  - Yoga is the method of unifying the discordant energies for a creative and constructive purpose.
  - These four yogas already exist in the Upanishadic thought as well as the Bhagavad Gita, but were never collated in the masterly manner in which Vivekananda has done it.
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# William Jones and Sanskrit

- Sanskrit is one of the oldest languages of the human race.
- Its “discovery” by European scholars can be traced to William Jones who in 1783 was appointed to the Bengal Supreme Court.
- Keen to learn about Indian jurisprudence, he began an ardent study of Sanskrit with the help of local scholars.
- In 1784, he wrote, “The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than Greek; more copious than Latin and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident, so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps no longer exists,”



William Jones (1746-1794)

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# Sanskrit

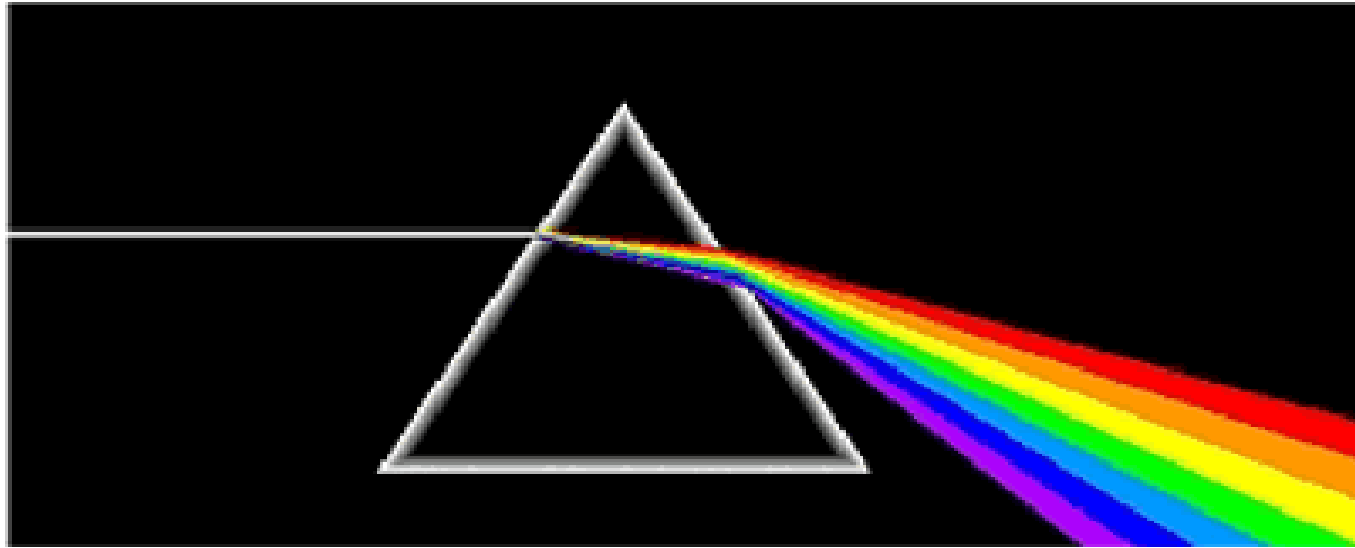
- This is a highly structured language with precise rules of grammar.
  - It is phonetic.
  - The roots of many European languages, including English can be traced back to Sanskrit.
  - Linguists infer the existence of Proto-Indo European (PIE) language from which Sanskrit is derived going as far back as 3500 BCE.
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## *atman*

- In many early translations, this word was translated as “soul” which is inaccurate.
  - A more accurate English rendering is “Self” to indicate background awareness bereft of any idea, thought or feeling.
  - One should definitely not confuse this with the ego.
-

# Spectrum of light



- The prism is space, time and causation.
- In Vedanta, Maya is space, time and causation (desa, kala, nimitta)
- Atman is the “Light” of Pure Consciousness; the prism represents the mind (maya).
- Ramakrishna referred to the Atman as the “Divine Mother”.

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## *From mother to matrix*

- The Sanskrit word *mata* connotes the “mother aspect” and so this word refers to the “life principle.”
  - The English word “mother” comes from the Latin *mater* which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit *matar*.
  - *matarisvan* is the matrix out of which things evolve. (Aurobindo)
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# Matrix and *mater*

- What does the word “matrix” mean?
- It is “that within which something originates, takes form.” (Webster’s dictionary)
- In mathematics, it means a grid of numbers or algebraic quantities.
- The word can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the work of Hermann Grassman, who wrote the first treatise on matrices.
- In fact, Grassman was a Sanskrit scholar and was the first to compile a German translation of the Rig Veda.



H. Grassman (1809-1877)

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# The yoga of knowledge

- Jnana yoga is the yoga of knowledge. The word jnana means knowledge and one can notice that the Sanskrit word *jna* which means 'to know' and the Greek word *gnosis* (from which the English word 'knowledge' is derived), have the same root.
  - This archaeology of daily language reveals how pervasive Sanskrit is in the English language and how many of ancient languages have mingled into our everyday conversation.
  - How does one get knowledge? This is the theme of the Upanishads.
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# *Upa* (near) + *ni* (below) + *shad* (sit)

- Upanishads are the recorded notes of students sitting “below” or “near” an illumined sage.
- Knowledge cannot be transmitted through books.
- It is transmitted by example, by experience and by life.
- A teacher (*guru*) must cut through the jungle of information and show the student (*shishya*) what to focus on.
- Vivekananda has cut through the forest of Vedanta literature.

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# The Real Nature of Man

Vivekananda begins his exposition of the yoga of knowledge by stating that the fundamental question that arises in every inquiring mind is “what is real?” What is the meaning of “reality”? In his essay, “The Real Nature of Man” he dismisses the position of the nihilists as mere childish prattle, and asks “In this body which is an aggregate of molecules of matter, is there anything real?” (BG, 272)<sup>1</sup> Tracing the question back to the Kathopanishad, as well as several passages in the Rig Veda, he writes that this is the underlying question of all religions. And in this inquiry, all religions, without exception, “hold that man is a degeneration of what he was, whether they clothe this in mythological words, or in the clear language of philosophy, or in the beautiful expressions of poetry.” Comparing the story of the deluge in the Bible with the story of Manu in Indian mythology, as well as other stories of the Babylonians, Egyptians and the Chinese, he emphasises that “what you call the most correct, systematic, mathematical language of the present time, and the hazy, mystical, mythological languages of the ancients, differ only in clarity. Both of them have a grand idea behind.” (BG, 273)

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# The Destiny of Man

Guarding the reader against both religious superstition and scientific superstition, he points out that the idea of man being a degeneration of what he was does not tally with the evolutionists. Man evolved from the mollusc, they say. But Indian mythology presents a theory of cycles and every evolution implies an involution. Referring to the scientific principle of the conservation of energy, he says "The modern scientific man will tell you that you can only get the amount of energy out of a machine which you have previously put into it. Something cannot be produced out of nothing. If a man is an evolution of the mollusc, then the perfect man - the Buddha - man, the Christ - man – was involved in the mollusc. If it is not so, whence come these gigantic personalities? Something cannot come out of nothing."

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# The Atman

Behind the body-mind complex, Vedanta says is the *Ātman* often translated as 'Self' with a capital 'S'. Usually, it is translated as "Pure Consciousness" as an abstract and impersonal concept. By its presence, all things are. A recurrent analogy in the Upanishads and in the Bhagavad Gita is its comparison to the sun. By its presence, the sun animates all life on the planet. Similarly, by the presence of Pure Consciousness, we are able to perceive our thoughts and feelings. But note that there is no implied agency in the good and bad. These are mental concepts and cannot be said to have an independent existence. They reside only in the realm of the mind. The *Ātman* is beyond mind.

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# Etymology of Atman

It is instructive to examine the Sanskrit word *ātman* a bit more closely. There is a linguistic relation to the Greek word *atmos* which means vapor or air. The German word *atmen* which means 'to breathe' conveys the same idea. Our English word "atmosphere" is derived from *atmos*. This does not mean that *ātman* means vapor or air but is meant to signify something without which we cannot be alive. It is beyond the realm of the mind but animates the energies of the mind, just as the sun animates all life on our planet.

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# Atman is beyond space, time and causation

Vivekananda amplifies this idea as follows. “The different philosophies seem to agree that this *Ātman*, whatever it be, has neither form nor shape, and that which has neither form nor shape must be omnipresent. Time begins with mind, space also is in the mind. Causation cannot stand without time. Without the idea of succession there cannot be any idea of causation. Time, space and causation, therefore, are in the mind, and as this *Ātman* is beyond the mind and formless, it must be beyond time, beyond space, and beyond causation. Now, if it is beyond time, space and causation, it must be infinite.” (BG, 276)

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# The meaning of Self

The 'Self' should not be confused with the ego. The 'Self' is consciousness bereft of any idea of 'I' or anything else. That is why one usually qualifies it as 'Pure Consciousness'. In English expositions of the Vedanta philosophy, we find that the mind-ego complex is often referred to as 'personality' and the word 'individuality' is understood from the standpoint of its root meaning and not as it is often used connoting uniqueness of the individual. In common parlance, these are used interchangeably. Hegel uses these words in exactly the opposite sense of Vedanta's usage. So this causes a great deal of confusion for the aspiring student of Vedanta.

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# Individuality and personality

The English word 'individuality' literally means 'that which is indivisible', or 'that which cannot be divided'. We cannot divide consciousness. It is indivisible. By contrast, the word 'personality' is derived from the Latin *persona* which means a 'mask.' Thus, the ego-mind complex consisting of our multifarious identifications such as our race, our nationality, our gender and so forth, are mere masks covering the indivisible, the individual, what Vivekananda describes as 'the Real Man'. Words become a problem as we try to describe that which is beyond words, beyond mind. But since our understanding is only through the medium of the mind, we have no choice.

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# Pure Consciousness is Singular

As this Pure Consciousness is infinite, there cannot be two. "The Real Man, therefore, is one and infinite, the omnipresent Spirit. And the apparent man is only a limitation of that Real Man. In that sense the mythologies are true that the apparent man, however great he may be, is only a dim reflection of the Real Man who is beyond." (BG, 276)

We must again observe caution in the use of the words. By the term 'Real Man' no gender is implied. This struggle for proper vocabulary is part of the difficulty in expositions of Indian philosophy expressed in the English language.

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# “The Real Man”

Vivekananda continues his explanation as follows. “The Real Man, the Spirit, being beyond cause and effect, not bound by time and space, must therefore, be free. He was never bound and could not be bound. The apparent man, the reflection, is limited by time, space and causation, and is, there-

fore, bound. Or in the language of some of our philosophers, he appears to be bound, but really is not. This is the reality of our souls, this omnipresence, this spiritual nature, this infinity. Every soul is infinite, therefore there is no question of birth and death.” (BG, 276)

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# Reflection

Thus, by this inner reflective process, we arrive at our infinite dimension. This should not be confused with the ego. In Vedanta, the word 'self' with a small 's' usually refers to the ego and 'Self' with a capital 'S' refers to the *Ātman*. Vivekananda amplifies this thus. "This idea of "me and mine" - *ahamkāra* and *mamat* - is the result of past superstition, and the more this present self passes away, the more the real Self becomes manifest. This is true self-abnegation, the centre, the basis, the gist of all moral teaching, and whether man knows it or not, the whole world is slowly going towards it, practicing it more or less." (BG, 280)

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# Maya/The snake and the rope

- Gaudapada says that just as we realize upon awaking that the dream images were simply our imagination, so we will realize that this world was simply our mental projection when we “awake” to the awareness of Brahman.
- “In a dark place, you see a rope, but you are not sure you are seeing a rope. You think you are seeing a snake, a jet of water or some such thing. All these are illusions. There is nothing but a rope and you have the illusion that the rope is a snake.”
- “Because of this illusion, fear comes and a host of other images. The snake has no existence independent of the rope. Similarly, this world has no existence independent of Brahman.” The relationship between the world we see and Brahman is the same as the relationship between the snake and the rope.





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# Shankara and advaita (non-dualism)

- In his commentary, Shankara begins by asking if there is anything in our experience that we can be certain of.
  - This echoes the question of Descartes and Russell.
  - Shankara begins by saying “Our senses may deceive us; our memory may be an illusion. The forms of the world may be pure fancy. The objects of knowledge may be open to doubt, but the doubter himself cannot be doubted. ... It cannot be proved because it is the basis of all proof. The self is self-established and is different from all else, physical and mental. As the subject, it is not the object. ... It is undifferentiated consciousness, which remains unaffected even when the body is reduced to ashes and the mind perishes.”
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# Atman and Brahman

- Shankara explains that the eternal Self is the Atman and the universal Self is Brahman.
  - “The world is bound up by the categories of space, time and cause. These are not self-contained or self-consistent. They point to something unalterable and absolute . . . Brahman is different from the space-time-cause world ... The empirical world cannot exist by itself. It is wholly dependent on Brahman ... but Brahman depends on nothing. Ignorance affects our whole empirical being. It is another name for finitude. To remove ignorance is to realize the truth. .. While absolute truth is Brahman, empirical truth is not false.”
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# The dream and the dreamer

- The dream depends on the dreamer for its existence. But the dreamer does not depend on the dream.
  - The dream is real along as the dreamer is dreaming. But not so when the dreamer awakes from the dream. Just as there is a difference in the level of awareness between the dream and awakening, so also is the chasm between the waking state and the enlightened state.
  - This is Shankara's famous mayavada, or the doctrine of illusion. It is often misunderstood as the statement "the world is unreal."
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# Saguna and Nirguna Brahman

- The highest representation of Brahman through logical categories is Isvara or Saguna Brahman, or qualified Brahman, described in the Patanjali Yoga Sutras.
  - Nirguna Brahman (or Brahman without qualities) transcends this and is the basis of the phenomenal world.
  - Building on Gaudapada, Shankara writes, “As one dreaming person is not affected by illusory visions of his dream because they do not accompany him in the waking state, so the one permanent witness of the three states is not touched by the mutually exclusive three states. For that the highest Self appears in those three states is a mere illusion, not more substantial than the snake for which the rope is mistaken in the twilight. The existence of the rope is not dependent on the appearance of the snake but the appearance of the snake is dependent on the rope. So also, the world is dependent on Brahman but Brahman is not dependent upon the world.”
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# The example of the thorn

- If a thorn is stuck in one's foot, we take another thorn and carefully remove it and then discard both thorns. We don't keep one as a souvenir.
  - Similarly, “this doctrine of the individual self having its Self in Brahman ... does away with the independent existence of the individual self, just as the idea of the rope does away with the idea of the snake (for which the rope has been mistaken).”
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# All that exists is Brahman

- With impeccable logic, Shankara asserts all that exists is Brahman. The substance of all experience is Brahman.
  - How does he arrive at this? Vivekananda explains. “Let us examine our perceptions. I see a blackboard. How does that knowledge come? What the German philosophers call “the thing in itself” of the blackboard is unknown. I can never know it. Let us call it x.”
  - “The blackboard x acts on my mind and the mind reacts. The mind is like a lake. Throw a stone in a lake and a reactionary wave comes toward the stone which strikes the mind and the mind throws a wave towards it and this wave is what we call the blackboard.”
  - “I see you. You as reality are unknown and unknowable. You are x and you act on my mind and the mind throws a wave that I call Mr. So and So.”
-



- “There are two elements in the perception, one coming from outside and the other from inside and the combination of these two,  $x + \text{mind}$ , is our external universe. All knowledge is by reaction.”
- “The real Self within me is also unknown and unknowable. Let us call it  $y$ . When I know myself as so and so, it is  $y + \text{mind}$ . That  $y$  strikes a blow on the mind. So our whole world is  $x + \text{mind}$  (external) and  $y + \text{mind}$  (internal),  $x$  and  $y$  standing for the thing in itself behind the external and internal worlds.”

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$$x = y$$

- “x and y are both unknown and unknowable. All difference is due to time, space and causation. These are the constituent elements of the mind. No mentality is possible without them. You can never think without time, you can never imagine without space and you can never have anything without causation. These are forms of the mind.”
  - Take them away and the mind itself does not exist. According to Vedanta, it is the mind, its forms that have limited x and y apparently and made them appear as external and internal worlds. But x and y being both beyond the mind, are without difference and hence one. We cannot attribute any quality to them, because qualities are born of the mind.”
  - “That which is quality-less must be one; x is without qualities, it only takes qualities of the mind. So does y; therefore these x and y are one.”
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# The matrix of associations

- When we try to understand when we say “we know”, we see that it is more or less classification and arrangement.
  - The mind is a network of associations and whatever we meet or perceive, we try to pigeonhole the perception. The process of pigeonholing is what gives rise to the feeling “I know”.
  - Knowledge arises from arranging facts, from the relationship between ideas. What we mean by a proof is a sequence of logical implications beginning with axioms that have been assumed without question.
  - Explanation only means this. We relate it to what has been known before or what has been deduced before. We associate it with past impressions.
  - When it comes to existential questions, the mind is baffled by the very questions and it cannot answer them. In the sense above, these questions are unanswerable.
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# Vivekananda explains

- “If knowledge means finding associations, then it must be that to know anything we have to see the whole series of its similarities... Suppose you take a pebble; to find the association, you have to see the whole series of pebbles similar to it.”
  - “But with our perception of the universe as a whole, we cannot do that, because in the pigeonhole of our mind, there is only one single record of the perception; we have no other perception of the same nature or class; we cannot compare it with any other. We cannot refer to its associations.”
  - “This bit of the universe, cut off by our consciousness, is a startling new thing, because we have not been able to find its associations. ... It is only when we find its associations that the universe will stand explained.”
  - “Until we can do that, all the knocking of our heads against a wall will never explain the universe, because knowledge is the finding of similarities and this conscious plane only gives us one single perception of it.”
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# Monism versus Non-dualism

- Dualism refers to any theory that states that there are two irreducible components to the subject under investigation.
  - Monism is the assertion that there is only one.
  - Non-dualism is the assertion that there are not two. (Advaita Vedanta)
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# The role of reason

- This does not mean we abandon reason. We must take reason as far as it can go. When that is done, Vedanta says, reason is transcended. But until then, we must rely on reason.
  - Shankara's advaita is deep and profound. Its insistence on rational thought and reason degenerated over the centuries into linguistic wrangling. Thus in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Ramanuja derived a form of "qualified" advaita known as *visishtadvaita*.
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# Ramanuja's objections to Shankara

- There is no proof of a non-differentiated substance. According to Ramanuja, differentiation is the only thing perceived.
  - Consciousness and Brahman are not identical. Rather, consciousness is an attribute of Brahman. Since the mind can only understand symbols and images, there is no point discussing the abstract that is beyond mind.
  - Therefore, Ramanuja gave his “qualified” view of the Brahman of the Upanishads.
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# Brahman, atman and jagat (world)

- For Ramanuja, Brahman, atman and jagat are different and eternal. At the same time, they are inseparable.
  - “Inseparability is not identity. Brahman is related to the other two as soul is to body. The three together form an organic whole.”
-

# Ramakrishna explains



- In a conversation with Vivekananda, Ramakrishna explains this as follows.
- “According to this theory, Brahman or the Absolute, is qualified by the universe and its living beings. These three, Brahman, the world, and living beings, together constitute One. Take the instance of a pumpkin. A man wanted to know the weight of it. You cannot get the weight by weighing only the flesh. You must weigh the flesh, the shell, and the seeds together. At first, it appears the important thing is the flesh not its seeds or shell.”
- “By reasoning, you find that the shell, seeds, and flesh all belong to the pumpkin. Likewise, in spiritual discrimination, one must first reason, following the method of “not this, not this”. Brahman is not the universe, it is not the living beings ... Then one realizes as with the pumpkin that the Reality from which we derive the notion of Brahman is the very Reality that evolves the idea of living beings and the universe. The absolute and manifestation are two aspects of one and the same Reality. Brahman is qualified by the universe and living beings. This is the theory of qualified non-dualism.”

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# Madhva's dvaita or dualism

- In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Madhva builds upon Ramanuja's system with one major change.
  - He rejects the interdependence of the three ideas, Brahman, atman and jagat. They are simply independent and eternal.
  - Thus, it is quite natural that a dualistic philosophy of "God and the world" emerges from such a view.
  - He emphasizes the emotional component of the psycho-physical being and advocates bhakti, or devotion to raise one's awareness.
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# Vivekananda comments on bhakti



- “The one great advantage of bhakti is that it is the easiest and most natural way to reach the divine end in view; its’ great disadvantage is that in its lower forms, it degenerates into hideous fanaticism. All the weak and undeveloped minds in every religion or country have only one way of loving their own ideal, that is by hating every other ideal. ... The same man who is kind, good, honest and loving to people of his own opinion, will not hesitate to do the vilest deeds when they are directed against persons beyond the pale of his own religious brotherhood.”
- However, this danger, Vivekananda says is in the early stages. “When the bhakti has become ripe, and has passed into the form called supreme or para-bhakti, no more is there any fear of those hideous manifestations of fanaticism.”
- Thus, if one is aware of this danger, one can use bhakti to raise one’s level of awareness.

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# Knowledge by identity

- Aurobindo writes, “In reality, all experience is in its secret nature knowledge by identity; but its true character is hidden from us because we have separated ourselves from the rest of the world by exclusion, by the distinction of our self as subject and everything else as object, and we are compelled to develop processes and organs by which we may again enter into communion with all that we have excluded. We have to replace direct knowledge through conscious identity by an indirect knowledge which appears to be caused by physical contact and mental sympathy. This limitation is a fundamental creation of the ego.”
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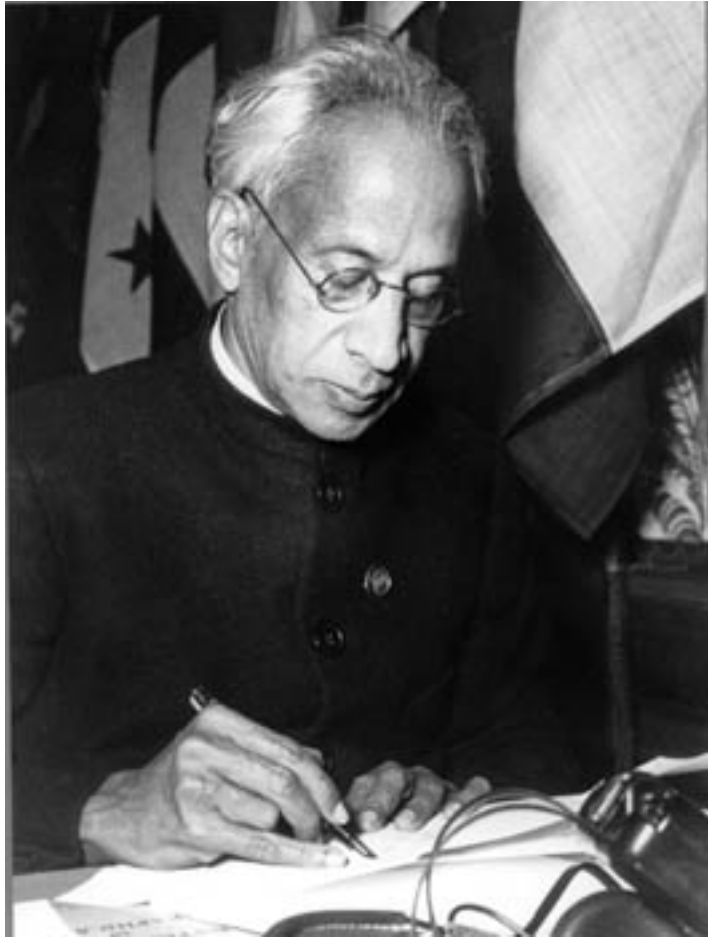


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# The underlying view of Vedanta

- No single view or system can encompass the cosmos and manifold experiences of the human psyche. It must be admitted that mind is in evolution.
  - Vedanta begins with the premise that there is something deeper than what is perceived either by the senses or the mind. But the way to discover this is through the mind. The “book” we must learn to read is our own mind.
  - As a scientist uses the reasoning faculty combined with intuition, so also the seeker after knowledge must combine both.
  - Vedanta is not a system, but rather a psychic journey. It is a journey of the mind. Just as science is not a finished system but is evolving, so also Vedanta represents the spiritual knowledge in evolution.
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# Radhakrishnan on meditation



- “Meditation is the way to self-discovery. By it, we turn our mind homeward and establish contact with the creative center. To know the truth, we have to deepen ourselves and not merely widen the surface. Silence and quiet are necessary for the profound alternation of our being and they are not easy in our age.”
- “What is called tapas is a persistent endeavor ... It is a gathering up of all dispersed energies, the intellectual powers, the heart’s emotions, the vital desires, nay, the very physical being itself and concentrating them all on the supreme goal. The rapidity of the process depends on the intensity of the aspiration, the zeal of the mind.”