

AN INTRODUCTION TO SANKARACHARYA'S

# ADVAITA VEDANTA

Swami Swaroopananda



**'The pot is not the clay. If the pot is the clay, when the pot disappears the clay must also disappear, but it doesn't'**

Whatever you perceive as many is nothing but the one Brahman – pure, absolute consciousness

**T**he advaita vedanta taught by Sri Sankara is rigorous, an absolute one. Sri Sankaracharya taught his advaita vedanta to people of the highest capacity, therefore there is no compromise on the truth. According to Sri Sankara whatever is, is Brahman. He said clearly that whatever exists is only Brahman, only pure consciousness. Brahman itself is absolutely homogeneous, meaning that although you see many, there is only one. Whatever you perceive as many is nothing but the one Brahman – pure, absolute consciousness. All difference and plurality are illusory, just as you see plurality in the ocean, in the waves, but the waves are water and the ocean is water. What is the true identity of the ocean? What is the true identity of the waves? What is the true identity of the droplets? Water is the true identity of all these. It is only water. Whatever you perceive to be plural is

only Brahman, there is no other reality – this was the teaching of Sankaracharya. Everything is nothing but pure absolute consciousness, while what you perceive is appearance. Brahman, the one without a second.

The atman is self-evident. You know that you exist, don't you? Even if you have a doubt. Who doubts? The one who exists doubts. When Sankaracharya says the atman is self-evident, it is the one you experience as 'I am, I exist'. You have this experience; you don't even have to say it. Therefore the one who exists is what? Consciousness. The one that is you is the perceiver, and the perceiver is consciousness. Forget about reflection or non-reflection. Ultimately the perceiver is nothing but consciousness. Therefore you don't need to prove it, because who is it that proves? Suppose you say, 'We have to prove it.' Who is the one who proves? The one who proves is

## 'There is only Brahman, and you are that. This is the truth'

the one that exists, the one who is the conscious one. So the atman is self-evident – you don't need to prove it. It is not established by extraneous proof. You don't need someone to come from the outside to tell you that you exist. Do you need Swami Swaroopananda to tell you that you exist? Even if he tells you, it is superfluous; it is not necessary. Because who is aware of Swami Swaroopananda? The one who is aware exists. It is not possible to deny the atman because the one who denies the atman is the one that exists, the consciousness. It is not possible to deny the atman because it is the very essence of the one who denies it. The one who denies it is exactly what you are trying to deny. The atman is the basis of all kinds of knowledge.

Who knows? The perceiver knows; the one who is consciousness, the one who exists. You say, 'I know', such as, 'I know vedanta', meaning there is one who knows vedanta. The one who knows vedanta is the one who is silent, the one who exists and the one who is consciousness. It is not someone else. Therefore Brahman is not someone else. When we talk about Brahman we don't talk about someone else, we talk about you, your innermost essence – this is what you are. The Self is within. Now where is the Self? We say in vedanta you have three things; the external – this is what you perceive – physical objects are external; the inner – the mind; and the innermost – the innermost is the one who knows the mind and the one who also knows the external physical world, and that one is you. That one is you, that one is consciousness, that one exists and that one does not need any proof. It is always pure, it is silent, it is alive, it loves, it is peaceful and simple. It is simple. The only thing that is simple is consciousness; nothing else besides consciousness is simple. The mind is not simple. The physical body, you know is not simple. The physical world is not simple. But the one who knows them is simple; consciousness is simple. And you are that consciousness, you are that atman, you are that Brahman. Self is within.

Now it is not just within – this is the beauty of vedanta. It is within and it is also without. You understand that whatever comes and goes, we say is just an appearance. Why? We don't say for example that this picture is not real, but we say there was a time when this picture was not there, and there will be a time when this picture will not be there. So before the picture came, and after it went, where is the picture? Therefore, if you say that this picture has an independent existence from consciousness, then it is not true. This picture does not have an independent existence from the one who is aware of it. If it has an independent existence where was it before, and where does it go when it disappears? So it is with all forms. What we say is not that the world is unreal, we say that the world is just an appearance, because it does not have an independent existence from the one who is aware of it, from consciousness. What vedanta says is, 'You behold a world that seems to have an independent existence, separate from you, independent from you'. This is false, it is not so. The one that perceives the world and the perceived, are nothing but phenomena within the one pure consciousness. So Sankaracharya says Self is within, Self is without. Therefore Self-realisation means that you do not just behold the atman within you, but also outside. Self is before you, Self is behind, Self is on the right, Self is on the left, Self is above, Self is below – there is only Brahman, and you are that. This is the truth.

Brahman is not an object. Brahman is not something separate from you that you are aware of. Therefore in vedanta we do not believe in a separate God. Brahman is not an object because you cannot perceive him with the eyes. He is not the perceived, because he is beyond the reach of the eyes. He is beyond the perceiver and the perceived. Both the perceiver and the perceived are phenomena within Brahman. As the Upanishads declare, 'Neti, neti' – 'Not this, not that'. The Upanishads say that anything you are going to say about Brahman is false, because Brahman is not an object and you can only say

### WHERE IS THE SELF?

**We say in vedanta you have three things:**

- 1 THE EXTERNAL**  
What you perceive:  
*physical objects*
- 2 THE INNER**  
The mind
- 3 THE INNERMOST**  
The one who knows the mind and the one who also knows the external physical world, **and that one is you.**

**That one is consciousness, and you are that consciousness, you are that atman, you are that Brahman. Self is within.**

# Ancient Wisdom Today

something about an object. Anything that I can say about anything, must be about objects. You cannot talk about things that are not perceivable. So when we want to talk about Brahman in vedanta, the only thing that we can say is 'Neti, neti' – this is what Sankaracharya taught.

The pot is not the clay. If the pot is the clay, when the pot disappears the clay must also disappear, but it doesn't. This is very important to understand. Essence can exist without the form, but form cannot exist without the essence. When we say 'Neti, neti', it does not mean that this form is Brahman. The form is never Brahman, but it never exists apart from it. Therefore if you say Swami Swaroopananda is Brahman that is not right. Swami Swaroopananda is just an appearance in Brahman, like anything else. What is the proof? Once upon a time Swami Swaroopananda showed up and there will come a time when Swami Swaroopananda will disappear, and at the moment he seems to exist. Therefore Swami Swaroopananda is not Brahman, but he does not have a separate existence either.

This does not mean that Brahman is a negative concept, a metaphysical abstraction, a non-entity or a void – in vedanta they say clearly that Brahman is not a void. Some people misunderstand Buddhism. They think that in Buddhism the highest reality is a void – they call it emptiness – but it is not a void. In vedanta it is very clear that Brahman is not a void and if you think this, you are mistaken. Brahman is not just nothing. Brahman is not another. If you think that when I speak about Brahman I speak about someone else that is not right. I speak about you. Brahman is not another, it is all full. Full is poorna, which means there is nothing lacking there, from any point of view. It is infinite, therefore only one, because there are not two infinities; changeless, it doesn't come and go; self-existent, meaning its existence does not depend on something else. For example, you can say that the existence of the microphone depends on electricity, or on matter. Then the existence of energy and matter depend on what? They depend on consciousness. This is what even today they are realising in physics – matter and energy depend on consciousness. But consciousness is independent, it does not depend on something else, it self-exists. Some people ask can there be consciousness without something to be conscious about? The answer is yes. If you are conscious, this thing that cannot exist without something to

**When you realise the atman, it is not that you become knowledgeable, you are knowledge**



**Jesus put it so nicely, 'Search for the kingdom of heaven first, and all the rest will come to you'**

be conscious about, is the subject. Subjects and objects appear simultaneously and disappear simultaneously. You cannot have a subject without an object and an object without a subject. Consciousness is always there even when there is no mental content, even when there is no subject and object. Consciousness is there, as in deep sleep, as in samadhi.

Self-existence, Self-delight. We think this means you are getting delight from other things. 'I am very happy because my beloved came.' Where do I get the delight from? My beloved. Now what will happen when my beloved goes? I will suffer. So this is not Self-delight – it depends on something else. Self-delight means that Brahman itself is delight. The atman itself is bliss. Someone asked me today, 'Suppose you are Self-realised, would you choose suffering or happiness?' The answer is that you cannot choose – God is always God and the atman is always bliss, so there is no choice. Once you remove the rust and realise this is gold, it is all bliss. What choice is there? You can only be what you are. Self-delight means it is bliss, it does not depend on something else. Self-knowledge – atman is consciousness. What is knowledge? Can there be knowledge without consciousness? Even if objects are there, if there is no consciousness, how can you talk about knowledge? Knowledge is consciousness, atman itself is knowledge. So when you realise the atman, it is not that you become knowledgeable, you are knowledge. That knowledge that you are searching for, you are. They say first find the Self – Jesus put it so nicely, 'Search for the kingdom of heaven first, and all the rest will come to you'. So the jnanis say, 'Know thyself and all the rest will come to you.' Jesus said the same thing, 'Where is the kingdom of heaven? Within you.'

Self-knowledge and Self-bliss – ananda, are the same thing. It is swarupa, it is essence. What is Brahman? Brahman is our true identity. Ocean is water, waves are water, droplets are water, iceberg is water, clouds are water. Water is the true identity of all of these, it is the essence. That essence is called swarupa. Brahman is the essence of everything else. Everything else is just an appearance. Brahman is the essence of this appearance. Brahman is the knower. Are you the knower? When you perceive are you the perceiver? Yes. What is the essence of the perceiver? Isn't it awareness or consciousness? It is the seer, the one that always witnesses everything. It is transcendent

because it is beyond the mind and beyond the body. How do we know? Because to know the mind, to know the physical body, to be the perceiver of them, you must be beyond them. If I was a part of this microphone I could never know it. Only when you transcend something can you know it. Now how do you know that you are the transcendent one? You know the physical world, you know the mind, you are beyond all of these things – now, at this moment. At this moment you can say that you are beyond them. It is the silent witness – consciousness is always silent. In what language does consciousness speak? In German, in Hebrew, in French? No, consciousness is the witness of all languages. But without consciousness all these languages have no existence. All the words, all the languages... everything has no existence without this silent witness; but when the silent witness is there, everything else is there. Not only is it silent; it is silence, peace. Can you disturb the peace of consciousness? Is it possible? How can you disturb it? It is like movie screen – there can be fire, there can be rain, but it is not disturbed – nothing you can do can disturb consciousness. You cannot say, 'My consciousness is disturbed', because when you say 'My consciousness', then who is the possessor of the consciousness? If you say, 'Ok, then consciousness is a possession', who is the possessor? The possessor is the consciousness.

Sankara's supreme Brahman is impersonal. What is personal? Personal means separate. What is so great about being separate, apart from the fact that we are used to it at the moment? We are used to the experience of being separate, but actually separate means to be alone. See how much we suffer, how much we want to be with others. Every person is afraid of being alone, of being lonely. Why? We are afraid of it because to be alone or to be separate is unnatural for us. Even if there is always someone with you, this feeling never goes away. Why? Because of this false experience that I am a separate being. There is always fear. But if it was a natural state there would be no fear, no suffering – I would not be afraid to be alone. Therefore they say Brahman is impersonal. Impersonal means it is never separate. Never. That separate is completely false. And it is without gunas, without attributes. You cannot say, 'Atman is big', as you can only say 'big' about an object. If you say Swami Swaroopananda is big, what do you mean? You mean that he is bigger than I am, but smaller than a dinosaur. There is no such

thing as big by itself. Big means big in relation to something else. If you say Swami Swaroopananda is small, it means smaller than the elephant, bigger than the ant. If you say that Swami Swaroopananda is wise, it means he is wiser than the ant and more stupid than Einstein. Anything that you say is always in relation to something else. So you can only give an attribute to things that are limited. What attributes can you give to something that is infinite? You cannot because infinite is something that cannot be two, it can only be one, and therefore you cannot give it attributes. Lord Krishna asked Arjuna in the tenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, 'Why do you ask all these details?' He said, 'Know that I exist, and with one molecule of my Self I support the whole of creation', meaning that

## 'Brahman is not another. If you think that when I speak about Brahman I speak about someone else that is not right. I speak about you'

although you think this creation is infinite, I am beyond creation and this creation is just a phenomena within me. This is the meaning of Brahman is without attributes, because how can you give attributes to the One?

Brahman is formless. This we don't have to prove, because consciousness is formless. What is the form of consciousness? We can say all the possible forms come from consciousness. So we can say all the possible forms, past, present and future, are forms of consciousness, but consciousness itself has no form – it is formless. Consciousness does not have any specific characteristics, for example in chemistry you learn that iron has specific characteristics. But what characteristics does consciousness have? If you say consciousness knows, this is not a characteristic of consciousness, this is the characteristic of the subject, not of consciousness. Because there is not another for consciousness, so how can you say consciousness knows? Even when we say sat-chid-ananda, these are not characteristics. This is the actual nature of the consciousness – like the fire and heat ■



**Swami Swaroopananda**

*Swami Swaroopananda is a senior disciple of Swami Vishnu-devananda and is Acharya (spiritual director) of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres on the west coast of America and Israel. He is also director of the Sivananda Ashram Yoga Retreat in Nassau, Bahamas.*