

Advaita Vedānta: Its Essence and Practice

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Śrī Śaṅkara Bhagavatpāda, out of boundless compassion for humanity, gave us the Advaita Siddhānta. In the simplest terms, Advaita holds that there is only one ultimate reality, one padārtha, and that is Brahman alone. There is nothing else. This is the most fundamental statement of the Advaita Siddhānta, and there is no need to complicate it further.

The Chāndogya Upaniṣad (3.14.1) declares this with singular clarity:

सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म ।

sarvam khalv idaṁ brahma /

"All this is indeed Brahman."

And Ādi Śaṅkarācārya himself gives us the celebrated formulation:

ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः ।

brahma satyaṁ jagan mithyā jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ /

"Brahman alone is real; the world is an appearance; the individual self is none other than Brahman."

Only Brahman is satyam. The jīvas are nothing but Brahman. This, in essence, is Śaṅkarācārya's Advaita Vedānta.

Throughout all his works, the Ācārya returns again and again to this one insight, Ekatvam, the Oneness. From the Maniṣā-pañcakam, one verse is a fitting example². He speaks of jāgrat (waking), svapna (dream), and suṣupti (deep sleep) — the different avasthās, the states of experience. Waking is one avasthā, dream is another, and deep sleep another. Beyond these, there are the states of childhood (bālya), youth (kaumāra), and old age

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² जाग्रत्स्वप्नसुषुप्तिषु स्फुटतरा या संविदुज्जम्भते या ब्रह्मादिपिपीलिकान्ततनुषु प्रोता जगत्साक्षिणी ।

सैवाहं न च दृश्यवस्त्विति दृढप्रज्ञापि यस्यास्ति चेत् चाण्डालोऽस्तु स तु द्विजोऽस्तु गुरुरित्येषा मनीषा मम ॥
Maniṣā-pañcakam

(vārdhaka). There is also the state of sorrow — "I am unhappy" — and the state of happiness. All these are avasthās.

Through all these states, across all bodies — from the Creator, Brahmā himself, down to the smallest ant (pipīlikā) — the one witness-consciousness, the jagat-sākṣī, shines without interruption. "I am that" — not the visible external object, but the witness itself. One who holds this understanding with unwavering conviction, whether he be a brāhmaṇa or a chāṇḍāla, is the Ācārya's guru. This, the Ācārya declares, is his manīṣā — his settled wisdom — and it is the refrain with which each of the five verses of the Manīṣā-pañcakam concludes:

चण्डालोऽस्तु स तु द्विजोऽस्तु गुरुरित्येषा मनीषा मम ।

caṇḍālo'stu sa tu dvijo'stu gurur ity eṣā manīṣā mama /

"Let him be a chāṇḍāla or a dvija — he is indeed my guru. That is my conviction."

The Inner Kāśī

The Kāśī-pañcakam is another beautiful composition — five verses in which the Ācārya describes a Kāśī-yātrā, a pilgrimage to Kāśī. But the pilgrimage he describes is entirely inward. When one goes to Kāśī, one visits the pañca-ghāṭas — the five sacred steps that descend to the river. In the verses of the Kāśī-pañcakam, the Ācārya shows that we carry our own pañca-ghāṭas within us. The first verse reads:

मनोनिवृत्तिः परमोपशान्तिः सा तीर्थवर्या मणिकर्णिका च ।

ज्ञानप्रवाहा विमलादिगंगा सा काशिकाऽहं निजबोधरूपा ॥

mano-nivṛttiḥ parama-upaśāntiḥ sā tīrtha-varyā maṇikarṇikā ca /

jñāna-pravāhā vimalā adi-gaṅgā sā kāśa-kāśī nija-bodha-rūpā //

"The supreme stillness that arises when the mind withdraws — that is the most sacred of tīrthas, the Maṇikarṇikā ghāṭa. The flow of wisdom that purifies — that is the primordial Gaṅgā. And I myself, in my very nature as pure awareness, am Kāśī. I need not go elsewhere."

The Ācārya here draws the entire outer pilgrimage inward. The Maṇikarṇikā ghāṭ is not a place on the banks of a river; it is the deep stillness that arises when the mind falls quiet. The sacred Gaṅgā is the flow of jñāna within. And Kāśī itself is one's own nature as pure awareness.

The Scriptural Foundation

The Advaita Siddhānta was not invented by Ādi Śaṅkara. It has always existed, just as the force of gravity existed long before Newton gave it a name. Apples were falling before Newton framed his law. In a real sense, Newton merely uncovered what was already the truth. In the same way, Advaita Siddhānta was always the truth of existence; the Ācārya brought it to us in a form that our minds could comprehend, and our lives could absorb.

The śruti-pramāṇas, the scriptural testimonies are abundant. The Kaṭhōpaniṣad states:

मृत्योः स मृत्युमाप्नोति य इह नानेव पश्यति ।

mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyum āpnoti ya iha nāneva paśyati /

"One who perceives only the world of multiplicity goes from death to death."

We are all, to some degree, in that state. We always think: this is our side, that is theirs; these are our people, those are strangers. We live in a world of divisive understanding. The Kaṭhōpaniṣad says plainly that one who sees only multiplicity is caught in the endless cycle of birth and death.

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad affirms the same³: Anudraṣṭavyam — it must be seen in this way. This knowledge is not something to be written in a book and memorised. It is ultimately an acceptance by the mind — manasā eva anudrāṣṭavyam — to be seen through the mind itself. Whatever the mind accepts becomes the reality by which one lives.

The Taittirīya Upaniṣad, in its Brahmānandavallī, describes the moment of creation with extraordinary clarity:

सोऽकामयत बहु स्यां प्रजायेयेति । स तपोऽतप्यत ।

स तपस्तप्त्वा इदं सर्वमसृजत । यदिदं किञ्च तत्सृष्ट्वा तदेवानुप्राविशत् ।

so'kāmayata bahu syāṃ prajāyeyeti / sa tapo'tapyata /

sa tapas taptvā idaṃ sarvaṃ asṛjata /

yad idaṃ kiñca tat sṛṣṭvā tad evānuprāviśat /

"He willed: Let me become many; let me multiply. He engaged in tapas. Having done so, He created all that exists. Having created it, He entered into it."

³ मनसैवानुद्रष्टव्यं नेह नानास्ति किञ्चन । Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

The phrase, "he entered into it", implies that there is a divine presence at the heart of every one of us, and within everything we see. This passage also reveals the three primordial powers: *Ichā-śakti* — the will ("let me become many"); *Jñāna-śakti* — the reflective inquiry (the *tapas*); and *Kriyā-śakti* — the act of creation. The order is not arbitrary: first comes desire, then knowledge, then action. This sequence cannot be reversed.

The Two Layers of Life

All of this is philosophically and scripturally sound. But then the practical problem arises. "Conceptual clarity is fine," one might say, "but I see a world of difference around me — birth, death, conflict, anxiety. What do I actually do with Advaita?" This is not a question that has suddenly arisen now. Ādi Śaṅkara Bhagavatpāda himself, having proposed the *Siddhānta*, would certainly have anticipated it.

All of us live what might be called a two-layered life. The first layer is the familiar daily routine — we wake up, have our coffee, and read the newspaper. If time permits in the morning, we do our practices such as *pooja*, *sandhya-vandanam*, and *parayana*; if not, we skip them. The office demands a swift departure. When will one return? Nobody knows — eight, or nine at night, perhaps later. After returning, the day feels over: eat something, watch TV, and that is it.

The second layer is full of challenges — tension, stress, competition, and burnout. People ridicule us; promotions are withheld; our children are not yet settled — a long list. We oscillate between these two layers. Nobody truly wants to live this kind of fragmented existence, but we do not know what the alternative looks like. And so time passes: the sun rises and sets, and our years are spent.

Where, then, is Advaita in all this? "You say everything is one — what do I do with that when I face the world?" The Ācārya, who proposed the *Siddhānta*, knew that when Advaita is taught, there will inevitably be confusion about its practical dimension. He does not leave us there.

A well-known story illustrates the difficulty. A great Advaita guru and his disciple were seated under a tree in the forest. An elephant in a state of intoxication came charging towards them, and the mahout called out warnings. The guru promptly climbed the tree. The disciple, holding an Advaita *bhāva* — the conviction that all the world is one — sat where he was. The elephant came, flung him aside with his tusk, and went on its way. When the guru climbed down, the bruised disciple asked: "Guruji, you have taught so

much Advaita — why did you climb the tree?" The guru asked in return: "Where did you see Advaita?" The disciple said, "In the elephant." The guru replied, "I saw the Advaita in the mahout."

The point is subtle but crucial. In vyavahāra — practical life — we must apply Advaita with discernment. Vyavahāra can only function when there is a clear perception of difference. And yet it is precisely when we forget the background of oneness that all the problems of modern life arise.

The Taittirīya Upaniṣad's teaching in the Brahmānandavallī makes this clear: as long as this world is perceived as one, there is nobody to be threatened, no room for competition, no ground for fear. The moment the slightest cleavage appears — "you are different from me" — fear enters, and with it all the complications that afflict modern society⁴. What we go through — tension, competition, burnout — is the direct consequence of living exclusively within a dvaita-prapañca, a world of duality, without the grounding of Advaita beneath it.

Indeed, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, in the celebrated dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Janaka, concludes with precisely this: Yājñavalkya tells Janaka, "You have become fearless now." That fearlessness is the fruit of a sound understanding of Advaita Siddhānta. The Ācārya, who understood this deeply, does not leave the student in confusion.

The Ācārya employs the rope-and-snake analogy to explain this. In a dimly lit room, a coil of rope lies on the floor. For most of us, a cold sweat breaks out: we are convinced it is a snake. A dull, inert object creates enormous fear simply because of misperception — this is the māyā-jāla. Once the light is switched on, one sees: "It is only a rope — not a snake at all." In the same way, this jīva is in truth the Paramātmā itself. When that is understood, fear dissolves. In the absence of this, we see the world as a complex social system made of Varṇa, Jāti, and Aśrama-dharma⁵.

⁴ एतस्मिन्नदृश्येऽनात्म्येऽनिरुक्तेऽनिलयनेऽभयं प्रतिष्ठां विन्दते। अथ सोऽभयं गतो भवति। युदा ह्येवैष एतस्मिन्नुदरमन्तरं कुरुते। अथ तस्य भयं भवति। तत्वेव भयं विदुषोऽमन्वानस्य। Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Brahmānandavallī

⁵ रज्जुसर्पवदात्मानं जीवं ज्ञात्वा भयं वहेत् । नाहं जीवः परात्मेति ज्ञातं चेन्निर्भयो भवेत् ॥ Ātma-bodha 27

Reconciling the Two Realities

The teaching is this: there are two levels of reality, two *sattās*. There is *vyāvahārika-sattā* — empirical or transactional reality, and there is *pāramārthika-sattā* — the ultimate reality. Both are necessary, and both must be clearly understood. For *vyavahāra* — for getting through the day and doing one's work — one needs *dvaita-bhāva*, the perception of distinctness. One cannot walk into the kitchen, pick up a kilogram of stone instead of rice, and cook lunch declaring "Sarvam Viṣṇumayam jagat" (all the world is Viṣṇu). Stone will not cook one's lunch. When we step into the world, we need the practical perception of duality; without it, nothing gets done.

At the same time, the *pāramārthika-sattā* — the Advaita — must be the constant undercurrent of awareness. The *ekatma-tattva-bhāva*, the sense of the unity of the Self, must always be present beneath whatever we do. This is precisely the reconciliation that all the Ācārya's *prakaraṇa-granthas* — his expository texts — address. They show how to hold both dimensions together.

In the *Maniṣāpañcakam*, the *Chandāla* — who turns out to be the Āchārya's true teacher — offers two beautiful illustrations before delivering his challenge. These two illustrate how the all pervading Brahman manifests as different entities in the world.

The first is the principle of *bimba-pratibimba* — original and reflection. Take a mirror and break it into twenty pieces: you will see twenty reflections of the same face. The face is one; the reflections appear many. One Brahman is reflected in the multiplicity of forms; the reflections appear different, but the source is one. The *Chandāla* asks, "Is there a difference between the sky reflected in the waters of the Gaṅgā and its reflection in muddy water in front of a dwelling?"⁶

The second illustration is the *ghaṭākāśa* — the space within a pot. Take a golden pot and a clay pot: which space inside is superior? There is no difference whatsoever⁷. The space is the same; only the container, the *upādhi*, differs. This shows how Brahman — the one infinite awareness — appears differently because of the different vessels through which it is expressed.

The Ācārya explains this with another illustration: take a drum of clear water and fill many bottles from it — bottles of red, green, and blue glass; round, square, and triangular shapes. Each appears to hold differently coloured, differently shaped water. Yet it is the

⁶ किं गङ्गाम्बुनि बिम्बितेऽम्बरमणौ चण्डालवीथीपयः । *Maniṣa-pañcakam*

⁷ पूरे वाऽन्तरमस्ति काञ्चनघटीमृत्कुम्भयोर्वाऽम्बरे । *Maniṣa-pañcakam*

same water throughout. This is upādhi-dharma — the properties of the container being mistakenly attributed to the content. Brahman, entering into different forms and configurations, appears to exhibit the properties of those forms⁸.

We can understand this with a comparison from chemistry: hydrogen supports combustion; oxygen supports it even more vigorously; yet H₂O — water — extinguishes fire. This is prakṛti-viśeṣa, the specific nature of a compound. Similarly, Brahman at the level of individual experience may appear to behave very differently depending on the upādhi through which it expresses. Reading the Ācārya's prakaraṇa-granthas, one finds a wealth of such explanations by which one can come to understand how the one Brahman appears as many, and how to hold both dimensions of this truth together in lived experience.

Advaita Cintanam in Daily Life

What then must we do? We need both levels of reality because we must live in society. Nobody can withdraw from the world without doing any work. And if one must work, one needs dvaita-bhāva — the practical perception of difference. But Advaita must remain the ground — the pāramārthika-sattā — on which all action rests. And this ekātma-cintanam, this constant awareness of the unity of the Self, is not a luxury. It is the very foundation of the quality of everything we do.

When Advaita cintanam is genuinely present, it brings broad-mindedness. Only with ekātma-cintanam can we have genuine broad-mindedness; without it, we cannot. Only with the sense of the oneness of all beings does true compassion and empathy arise. Some years ago, there was a severe flood in Mantralaya. An NGO founder recounted how, when donations came in, people sent items they would not themselves use — broken toys, torn garments. The cost of disposing of such unusable items was itself considerable. Why does this happen? Because people feel that the flood victims are somehow different from their own children. The moment even a beginning of ekātma-cintanam stirs in us, we begin to give as we would give to our own child. We do not send a torn shirt to our own child. That feeling — that the other is not different — comes only from cintanam.

This is precisely what the Taittirīya Upaniṣad means when it instructs, “Give with faith. Do not give without faith. Give with joy. Give with humility. Give with awareness”⁹. One

⁸ नानोपाधिवशादेव जातिवर्णाश्रमादयः । आत्मन्यारोपितास्तोये रसवर्णादि बेदवत् ॥ Atma-bodha 11

⁹ श्रद्धया देयम् । अश्रद्धयाऽदेयम् । श्रिया देयम् । हिया देयम् । भिया देयम् । संविदा देयम् । Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Sīkṣāvallī

should not give with condescension — "I am a great person bestowing something upon you." Such an attitude destroys the giver's character far more than it harms the receiver. That is why Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahaṃsa said to serve the poor as Daridra Nārāyaṇa — to kneel before them and give. The source of such an impulse is nothing other than ekatma-cintanam.

Everything we do from morning to evening — giving directions, working through difficult situations, dealing with colleagues and subordinates — will still need doing. But the way we do it, the way we regard those we work with, will completely transform. A jñāni does not walk about with a label on his forehead announcing his understanding. His jñāna shows in his vyavahāra. Similarly, if Advaita-cintanam genuinely takes root in us, our conduct will reveal it without announcement.

The stress will also diminish. At the ultimate level, there is no real "you" separate from "me." In the empirical world, we see and work with differences — but when we are conceptually grounded in a sound understanding of non-duality, we behave differently in the world of duality as well.

The real purpose of all this — the uddeśa — is not to outmanoeuvre others or secure a faster promotion. Those are sub-goals that have been mistaken for the main goal. The main goal is vyaktitva-vikāsa — the full flowering of the human personality. Just as a great river can pour itself entirely into the ocean and the ocean does not even stir, so too the fully developed human personality gives of itself without any diminishment or depletion. For this full flowering, we need Advaita-cintanam. We will continue to engage in vyavahāra as long as we are part of society — but we must cultivate this deeper ground.

Bhakti as the Way: The Śivānandalaharī

How does one develop this Advaita-cintanam? There seems to be only one truly practical way: bhakti. The thinking must be cultivated, and that cultivation can only happen through surrender and devotion. We can only pray to our chosen deity, our iṣṭa-devatā: "Give me this frame of mind."

The Śivānandalaharī — one hundred verses of pure, flowing bhakti is Ācārya's gift to us to cultivate bhakti. Reading all one hundred verses makes one saturated in bhakti from beginning to end. It is like a jāmūn immersed in sugar syrup. The Ācārya himself shows, throughout this work, how deeply bhakti and Advaita are intertwined.

In one verse of the Śivāandalaharī, the Ācārya asks: what do I offer my Lord? Ordinarily, in devotion, one brings something to the deity. But he reflects: the entire auspiciousness of the universe — akhila-śubha — lies already at the Lord's feet. What do I have that He does not? So the Ācārya offers the one thing that is truly his own: his mind. That is all he can give — and it is the highest gift¹⁰.

In another verse, he considers what to ask from the Lord — and proceeds with gentle humour through an inventory of everything Śiva possesses. The Lord keeps hālahala poison; one cannot receive that. His garland has great serpents; one cannot go near. His garment is an elephant's skin; hardly something one could wear. His vehicle is the great bull, Mahokṣa; of no practical use to us. One by one, every worldly gift is ruled out. Having gone through his inventory, the Ācārya arrives at the only petition worth making: "At least grant me unwavering bhakti at your feet."¹¹ That, and nothing else, is what should be asked.

A story illustrates the folly of asking for the wrong things. A king was once lost in a forest. A hunter found him and led him to safety. The king said, "Come to me tomorrow — I will give you whatever you ask." The next day, the hunter came. The king was ready to offer the entire kingdom. What did the hunter ask? One kilogram of rice and two kilograms of vegetables, enough to eat for a few days. He could have asked for the kingdom, but instead asked for provisions. In the same way, when we stand before God, we ask for a vehicle, some little favour, or promotions, when we could ask for bhakti.

In another verse, he describes seekers who brave deep forests — places that others cannot even reach — in search of a rare and special flower to offer to the Lord. Then he turns to them and says: "You already have a flower here — the hṛdaya-kamala, the lotus of the heart. You do not know how to take it and offer it to me."¹² The rarest and finest offering is always already within us, waiting to be given.

This is the final teaching. We must surrender to our iṣṭa-devatā — through the Śivāandalaharī, the Soundaryalaharī, the Narasiṃha Karavāmbastōtra, the Kṛṣṇāṣṭakam, the Gaṇeśa Pañcaratnam, or whatever form of the divine speaks to our heart. We should

¹⁰ करस्थे हेमाद्रौ गिरिश निकटस्थे धनपतौ गृहस्थे स्वर्भूजाऽमरसुरभिचिन्तामणिगणे ।

शिरस्थे शीतांशौ चरणयुगलस्थेऽखिलशुभे कमर्थं दास्येऽहं भवतु भवदर्थं मम मनः ॥ Śivāandalaharī 27

¹¹ अशनं गरलं फणी कलापो वसनं चर्म च वाहनं महोक्षः ।

मम दास्यसि किं किमस्ति शम्भो तव पादाम्बुजभक्तिमेव देहि ॥ Śivāandalaharī 87

¹² गभीरे कासारे विशति विजने घोरविपिने विशाले शैले च भ्रमति कुसुमार्थं जडमतिः ।

समर्प्यैकं चेतः सरसिजमुमानाथ भवते सुखेनावस्थातुं जन इह न जानाति किमहो ॥ Śivāandalaharī 9

pray deeply and ask for bhakti. That bhakti will carry us to Advaita-cintanam. And once Advaita-cintanam is established, we will trade the complex paths of the world with ease, clarity, and purpose. In this journey, we find the necessary condition for our own liberation.

We need both wheels. An aircraft cannot take off on one wheel alone. It needs both wheels on the runway, building enough speed to generate the lift that carries it into the air. We need to live simultaneously with the power of vyavahāra and the depth of paramārthabhakti. In the preamble to his Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya, the Ācārya himself declares this: we need both pravṛtti and nivṛtti. We must be part of society; that is a winning game for us. Pravṛtti and nivṛtti must coexist in us — this is the most practical teaching in all of Śaṅkarācārya's work.

On this auspicious occasion of Śaṅkarācārya Jayantī, let us pray to the Ācārya, to our iṣṭa-devatā and kula-devatā, for the vision and the inner strength to live this teaching. We need that quality of seeing — and we need it with some urgency.