

## Epistemological and Metaphysical Development in Advaita Vedanta



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**ABSTRACT:** Gaudapada, the grand teacher of Sankara, admits the transcendental reality only. Duality is mere illusion. Gaudapada leads us from gross reality to subtle reality. In meditation also there is a gradual unfolding of subtlety. Sankara deals with both Advaita metaphysics and epistemology. According to him, the source of cognition (*pramana* is a mental mode (*antahkaranavrtti*). It removes the ignorance of the object. *Brahmakara antahkaranavrtti* is the final mental mode. In Advaita epistemology there is a gradual unfolding of mental mode. Sankara advocates three levels of reality- the transcendental reality, empirical reality and apparent reality. All objects, Sankara holds, are real in their own levels of existence. His philosophy teaches us the gradual unfolding of reality.

**KEY WORDS:** Omkara, Visva, Taijasa, Prajna, Vivarta, Maya, Antahkaranavrtti, Paramarthika satta, Vyavaharika satta, Pratibhasika satta

The word ‘development’ means gradual unfolding. We frequently use the term ‘development’ in the sense of physical growth. We notice physical development in the bodies of human beings, animals, creatures, trees and the like. We use the term in the growth of society. Society has two aspects- one is external and the other is internal. The former represents the civilization and the latter represents the culture. While formulating the philosophical theories the philosophers sometimes follow the method of gradual unfolding. In the present paper I will make an attempt to deal with the epistemological and metaphysical development from the points of views of Advaita Vedanta.

The term “Vedanta” means Upanisad and the theory discussed there on. The seers of the *Upanisads* proclaim that Brahman is the only reality and the world of experience has no separate reality apart from Brahman. There are three *prasthanas* of Vedanta, the *sruti-prasthanas*, the *smṛti-prasthanas* and the *nyaya-prasthanas*. The sacred *Upanisads* belong to the first, the *Bhagavadgita* to the second and the *Brahma-sutra*, also known as *Sariraka-sutra*, to the third. The *Mandukyakarika* is the earliest Advaita Vedanta text. It is authored by Gaudapada, the grand teacher of Sankara. Gaudapada’s philosophy centers round Brahman. He is sattaikavadin. He admits the transcendental reality alone. Brahman or the Self is the only reality. Duality is mere illusion.<sup>1</sup> The objects of the inner and outer world are unreal. The dream objects are unreal because they get cancelled by the normal experience. The objects experienced in our waking state also are unreal because they do neither exist in the beginning nor in the end. There are two kinds of things, things in dream and those in waking state. Both of them are imagined in mind. The only difference between them is that the former is imagined inside and are not fixed vanishing at once, while the latter is imagined outside and are fixed.<sup>2</sup>

Gaudapada says Brahman or the “Self” is all that has been and all that will be. He must be known for the fulfilment of the mission of one’s life. Brahman or Turiya is very subtle. So Gaudapada leads us gradually from the gross reality to the subtle reality. He maintains that the self, though in reality, only one remains in the body in three forms in accordance with its three states, jagrat “waking”, svapna “dream” and susupti “deep sleep”. When the self is in the waking state He is called *Visva* i.e. ‘all’ because as an embodied one (*sarira*) he is known to every man. In the state of dream he is called *taijasa* i.e. brilliant because he himself is his light. In the dream state the self does not depend for his light on others for seeing things there. But in the waking state the self is to take light from the sun, the moon and fire. In the deep state the self is called *prajna* i.e. intelligent because he is never dissociated from his intelligence. Besides his three forms or quarters (*padas*), there is one form more; it is his real or innate form. It is beyond all expressions, and is simply designated by the word *Turiya*.<sup>3</sup> This *Turiya* is above all changes and duality, and when realized removes all miseries. Gaudapada’s philosophy teaches us that in dream the *Visva jiva* merges in *Taijasa jiva*, in the deep sleep (*susupti*) the *Taijasa jiva* merges in *Prajna jiva* and ultimately the *Prajna jiva* merges in *Turiya*, the Ultimate Reality. Thus we notice the gradual unfolding of reality in Gaudapada’s philosophy.

Notably, Gaudapada formulates this gradual unfolding of Advaita metaphysics for the competent readers (*mukhya adhikarin*) of Advaita Vedanta. For the beginners of the study of Advaita Vedanta he prescribes the meditation of *Omkara*. Om is a mono-syllabic

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word. It is constituted by the three letters, *a*, *u*, and *m* which is followed by *nada*. The meditator is advised to meditate *a* as the *Visva jiva*, *u* as the *Taijasa jiva* and *m* as the *Prajna jiva*. The *sadhaka* who meditates *Om* in this way can realize the qualified Brahman. In the meditation of *Om*, as Gaudapada holds, the letter *a* merges in *u* and *u* merges in *m*. In the state of *turiya* none is led to anywhere, it itself being the cessation of reality.<sup>4</sup> In meditation of *Om* there is a gradual unfolding of subtlety.

Now I like to deal with the views of Sankara and his followers. Sankara is the chief protagonist who formulates the whole Advaita scheme. Unlike Gaudapada Sankara is the writer of the three *prasthanas*. He writes commentaries on the Principal *Upanisads*, the *Bhagavadgita* and *Brahma-sutra*. Besides, he writes 50 minor works and 90 stotras. He formulates the theory of *kevaladvaita*. According to him, Brahman is the only reality. The world is unreal (*mithya*); it has no reality of its own. It has names and forms (*nama-rupa*) which are caused by the primordial ignorance (*mulajnana*).<sup>5</sup> The essence of Brahman is Eternal Existence, Eternal Consciousness and Eternal Bliss. The Existence-aspect of Brahman is not different from the Consciousness-aspect and the Consciousness-aspect is not different from the Bliss-aspect. The Existence-aspect and the Consciousness-aspect of Brahman are somehow cognized by the ordinary man. But the Bliss-aspect of Brahman is not revealed to the ordinary people. For the realization of the Bliss-aspect of Brahman the mental mode in respect of Brahman (*brahmajnana*) is necessary.

Both Gaudapada and Sankara are the teachers of Advaita Vedanta. While Gaudapada deals with Advaita metaphysics only, Sankara deals with both Advaita metaphysics and epistemology. Like the Bhatta Mimamsakas the Advaitins also maintain that foundation of *prameya* depends on the *pramana* in the empirical state. The teachers of Advaita Vedanta hold that due to ne-science one Consciousness appears in four aspects, *pramatrcaitanya*, *prameyacaitanya*, *pramanacaitanya* and *pramiticaitanya*. Consciousness conditioned by the internal organ (mind) is the cognizer (*pramatr*). Consciousness conditioned by the objects like jar etc. is the object of cognition (*prameya*). Consciousness conditioned by the mental mode (*antahkaranavrtti*) is *pramanacaitanya* i.e. source of cognition. Consciousness conditioned by the cognition is *pramiticaitanya* which is also known as *phalacaitanya*. *Pramiticaitanya* is called *prama* in the true sense of the term. But the teachers of Advaita Vedanta consider *antahkaranavrtti* or mental mode to be *prama* in a figurative sense.<sup>6</sup> Mind or *antahkarana* is an inner sense-organ. In a cognitive act, *antahkarana* which is of the nature of light goes out through the channel of the eyes, pervades the object and assumes its form. Just as the water of the tank going out through a hole and entering the fields through the channel assumes its form, similarly mind going through the eye and receiving the object takes its form. This is technically called *vrtti*.<sup>7</sup> According to Advaita Vedanta, *vrtticaitanya* removes the ignorance of the object and *phalacaitanya* or *pramiticaitanya* reveals the object to the subject. The final mental mode is *brahmakara antahkaranavrtti*. It is called *carama vrtti*. The *mahavakya*-s like *tattvamasi* produce the *carama vrtti*. The *brahmakara vrtti* removes the primordial ignorance (*mulajnana*) as a result of which emancipation dawns. But the mental mode in respect of Brahman (*brahmakara antahkaranavrtti*) does not arise in the mind of all. It arises in the *sattvika* mind only. There are three levels of *vrtti*, the *sattvika vrtti*, the *rajasa vrtti* and the *tamasa vrtti*. The first is called *santa*, the second the *ghora* and the third the *mudha*.<sup>8</sup> According to Advaita Vedanta, the *mudha vrtti* is the lowest level of mental mode. The *ghora vrtti* is the higher level of mental mode. The *santa vrtti* is the highest level of mental mode. The final mental mode in respect of Brahman (*brahmakara antahkaranavrtti*) is the highest level of mental mode. This mental mode does depend on any mode for its removal. It ceases automatically. Thus we notice the gradual unfolding of mental mode in Advaita Epistemology.

Now I like to discuss the metaphysical development from the point of view of Sankara and his followers. Sankara's Advaita metaphysics differs from Gaudapada's Advaita metaphysics. Gaudapada is the upholder of *mayavada*, while Sankara is the advocate of *vivartavada*. Gaudapada says the world is *maya* i.e. illusion. But Sankara holds that the world is the *vivarta* of Brahman. *Vivarta* is apparent modification and *parinama* or *vikara* is actual transformation or change. The change of milk into curd is called *parinama* or *vikara*, because it is an actual transformation. But in the mistake of snake on the rope the illusory snake is the *vivarta* of the rope, because it is an apparent change, not actual change. Similarly, the world is the *parinama* of ignorance (*ajnana*) about Brahman and *vivarta* of Brahman. Primordial ne-science (*mulajnana*) actually transforms itself into the world, but Brahman does not really transform itself into the world. Brahman seems to be transformed into the world. Mayavadin Gaudapada admits *paramarthika satta* alone, while Vivartavadin Sankara admits three levels of reality, transcendental reality (*paramarthika satta*), empirical reality (*vyavaharika satta*) and apparent reality (*pratibhasika satta*). *Pratibhasika sat* or apparent reality gets cancelled by the empirical knowledge. *Vyavaharika sat* or empirical reality gets cancelled by the transcendental knowledge. *Paramarthika sat* or ultimate reality always remains uncontradicted. The objects experienced in dream and illusion are *pratibhasika sat*. The objects which we experience in the waking state are *vyavaharika sat*. Brahman is *paramarthik sat*. The apparent reality is the lowest level of reality, the empirical reality is the next higher level of reality and the transcendental reality is the highest level of reality. All objects, according to Sankara, are real in their own level of existence, but false in higher level of existence.

On our rapid survey it reveals that Sankara's Advaita Vedanta teaches us gradual unfolding of mental mode and reality. Advaita metaphysics leads an aspirant from the lowest level of reality to the highest level of reality. Similarly, Advaita epistemology leads the reader from the *mudha* mental mode to the *santa* mental mode reaching which the reader savours the delight of his own self.

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