

Misconceptions about Advaita

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First published in the Mountain Path of the Sri Ramanashram

The Allure of the Direct Path

Advaita, which refers to the state of non-duality of the Self and God, can easily lend itself to all sorts of misconceptions. Indeed one can argue that since the Advaitic state transcends all thought and all dualities, all conceptions about it are ultimately misconceptions!

Advaitic practice is itself about the removal of misconceptions, particularly wrong ideas about our true nature, negating its false identification with the body and the external world. But misconceptions about the path also exist and can be significant obstacles to overcome along the way. Of course many of these same misconceptions can be found relative to any spiritual path, because all spiritual paths aim to take us to a higher state of consciousness, which can appeal to fantasy and escapism as well as to genuine aspiration. Yet as Advaita is the highest and most direct path this potential for distortion is even greater, like an ordinary climber's fantasy to quickly scale the heights of Mount Everest.

Advaita is formless in nature and in practice, so there is much room for overestimating, if not exaggerating one's attainments, and little objective to keep one grounded. Going all the way back to the Upanishads there are criticisms of practitioners who can brilliantly talk the Advaitic line but lack the realization to really back it up. Advaita, though referring to the Brahmic state beyond Maya, therefore, has its own glamour or Maya. The allure of a quick and direct path to becoming God and guru has a special appeal not only to the awakened soul but also to the unawakened ego that wants the glory of spiritual realization without undergoing any real toil or tapas in order to get there.

These usual misconceptions are getting further magnified as Advaita becomes popular in the West, which as a media dominated culture easily falls into stereotype, image production and fantasy-fulfillment. Just as Yoga has undergone many distortions in the West, which has reduced it largely to a physical asana practice, so too Advaita is often getting reduced to an instant enlightenment fad, to another system of personal empowerment or to another type of pop psychology.

An entire 'neo-Advaitic' movement has arisen reflecting not only traditional teachings but the demands of western culture. While this movement is arguably a good trend for the future and contains much that is positive in it, it is also a fertile

ground for many distortions, which are likely to become more pronounced as the popular base of the movement expands.

The Advaitic path is rooted in a powerful and simple logic, which is not difficult to learn. “You are That”, “The Self is Everything”, “All is One”, and so on. We can easily confuse adapting this logic, which is not difficult, with the actual realization of the state of awareness behind it, which is something else altogether. We can answer all questions with “Who is asking the question?”, when it may be no more than a verbal exercise.

Faced with both old and new misconceptions, the Advaitic student today is in a difficult position to separate a genuine approach and real guidance from the bulk of superficial or misleading teachings, however well-worded, popular or pleasant in appearance these may appear to be.

Advaita and Vedanta

Advaita is primarily a term of Advaita Vedanta, the non-dualistic tradition of Vedanta. Though rooted in the Vedas, Upanishads and Gita, its most characteristic form occurs in the teachings of Shankaracharya (c. 500 AD), who put these Vedic teachings in a clear rational language that remains easily understandable to the present day. The basic language and logic of Shankara can be found behind most Advaitic teachings, even those who may not have studied Shankara directly. There are many specifically Advaitic texts from Shankara’s Upanishadic commentaries to more general works like Yoga Vasishtha, Avadhuta Gita, Ashtavakra Samhita and Tripura Rahasya as part of an enormous literature, not only in Sanskrit but in all the dialects in India.

Similarly, there have been many great gurus in the tradition of Advaita Vedanta throughout the centuries. Most of the great gurus of modern India have been Advaitins including Vivekananda, Rama Tirtha, Shivananda, Chandrashekhar Saraswati of Kanchi, Ramana Maharshi and Anandamayi Ma. Most of the great gurus from India who brought Yoga to the West like Vivekananda, Yogananda, Satchidananda and Swami Rama, also taught Advaita Vedanta, if we really look at their teachings.

However, a recent trend has been to remove Advaita from Vedanta, as if it were a different or independent path, and not bring in the greater tradition of Vedanta. Though neo-Advaita usually bases itself on modern Advaita Vedantins like Ramana Maharshi or Nisargadatta, it usually leaves the Vedanta out of the term and neglects the teachings of other great modern Vedantins from Vivekananda to Dayananda, though their works are easily available in English and quite relevant to any Advaitic practice.

This 'Advaita without Vedanta' is particularly strange because many important ideas found in the neo-Advaita movement, like that a universal path of Self-knowledge, reflect the neo-Vedanta movement that was popular in the early twentieth century following the teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and have been echoed throughout the modern Vedanta movement.

Neo-Advaita and Ramana Maharshi

The teachings of Ramana Maharshi are often the starting point for neo-Advaitic teachers, though other influences also exist in the movement. However, instead of looking into the background and full scope of Ramana's teachings, there is often only a focus only on those of his teachings that seem to promise quick realization for all.

Some neo-Advaitins even refer to Ramana's teachings as if Ramana was a rebel or outside of any tradition, almost as if he invented Advaita himself. While Ramana based his teaching on his own direct realization, he frequently quoted from and recommended the reading of Advaitic texts, which he found represented the same teachings as those that arose from his own experience. This included not only the works of Shankara, the main traditional Advaitic teacher, but many other texts like Yoga Vasishtha, Tripura Rahasya and Advaita Bodha Dipika.

Ramana did broaden out the traditional Advaitic path from its medieval monastic Hindu forms. Yet even in this regard he was continuing a reformation since Vivekananda who created a practical Vedanta or practical Advaita and taught it to all sincere seekers, not just to monastics.

Many students come to neo-Advaitic teachers because of Ramana's influence, looking for another Ramana or for instruction into Ramana's teaching, but apart from Ramana's image used by the teacher, what they get may be something different. That someone may use the image of Ramana or quote from him, therefore, is no guarantee that their teaching is really the same.

Are There Prerequisites for Advaita?

One of the main areas of difference of opinion is relative to who can practice Advaita and to what degree? What are the prerequisites for Self-inquiry? Some people believe that Advaita has no prerequisites, but can be taken up by anyone, under any circumstances, regardless of their background or life-style. After all, Advaita is just teaching us to rest in our true nature, which is always there for everyone. Why should that rest on any outer aids or requirements? This is a

particularly appealing idea in the age of democracy, when all people are supposed to be equal.

In much of neo-Advaita, the idea of prerequisites on the part of the student or the teacher is not discussed. Speaking to general audiences in the West, some neo-Advaitic teachers give the impression that one can practice Advaita along with an affluent life-style and little modification of one's personal behavior. This is part of the trend of modern yogic teachings in the West that avoid any reference to asceticism or tapas as part of practice, which are not popular ideas in this materialistic age.

However, if we read traditional Advaitic texts, we get quite a different impression. The question of the aptitude or adhikara of the student is an important topic dealt with at the beginning of the teaching. The requirements can be quite stringent and daunting, if not downright discouraging. One should first renounce the world, practice brahmacharya, and gain proficiency in other yogas like Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Raja Yoga and so on (the sadhana-chatushtya). One can examine texts like the Vedanta Sara I.6-26 for a detailed description. While probably no one ever had all of these requirements before starting the practice of Self-inquiry, these at least do encourage humility, not only on the part of the student, but also on the part of the teacher who himself may not have all these requirements!

Ramana keeps the requirement for Advaita simple yet clear – a ripe mind, which is the essence of the whole thing, and encourages practice of the teaching without overestimating one's readiness for it. Yet a ripe mind is not as easy as it sounds either.

Ramana defines this ripe mind as profound detachment and deep discrimination, above all a powerful aspiration for liberation from the body and the cycle of rebirth – not a mere mental interest but an unshakeable conviction going to the very root of our thoughts and feelings (note Ramana Gita VII. 8-11).

A ripe, pure or sattvic mind implies that rajas and tamas, the qualities of passion and ignorance, have been cleared not only from the mind but also from the body, to which the mind is connected in Vedic thought. Such a pure or ripe mind was rare even in classical India. In the modern world, in which our life-style and culture is dominated by rajas and tamas, it is indeed quite rare and certainly not to be expected.

To arrive at it, a dharmic life-style is necessary. This is similar to the Yoga Sutra prescription of the yamas and niyamas as prerequisites for Yoga practice. In this

regard, Ramana particularly emphasized a sattvic vegetarian diet as a great aid to practice.

The problem is that many people take Ramana's idea of a ripe mind superficially. It is not a prescription that anyone can approach or practice Advaita in any manner they like. Advaita does require considerable inner purity and self-discipline, developing which is an important aim of practice which should not be lightly set aside.

Is Advaita Against Other Yoga Practices?

A related misconception is that Advaita is against other spiritual and yogic practices like mantra, pranayama, puja and bhakti, which from its point of view are regarded as of little value and only serve to condition the mind further. Even a number of traditional Advaitic texts speak of setting all such other yogic practices aside as useless. Many neo-Advaitins emphasize such advanced teachings. They may tell even beginning students to give up all other practices and discourage them from doing mantras, pranayama or other yoga techniques. We could call this 'Advaita without Yoga'.

Traditional Advaita, which Ramana echoed, states that advanced aspirants who are truly ready for a dedicated path of self-inquiry can discard other yogic practices if they are so inclined. But it also states that for gaining a ripe mind, developing proficiency in these preliminary practices is a good idea. Most people can benefit from at least some support practices, particularly beginners, even if their main focus is Self-inquiry. Note the Ramana Gita VII. 12-14 in this regard.

If we study traditional Advaita, we find that Yoga practices were regarded as the main tools for developing the ripe mind necessary for Advaita to really work. Many great Advaitins taught Yoga as well. Even Shankara taught Tantric Yoga in his teachings like Saundarya Lahiri and composed great devotional hymns to all the main Hindu Gods and Goddesses. This tradition of Yoga-Vedanta – using Yoga to create a ripe or sattvic mind, and using Advaita for the higher realization through it – has been the dominant approach in Vedanta found not only in the works of older gurus like Shankaracharya and Vidyaranaya, but in modern gurus like Vivekananda, Shivananda and Yogananda.

Ramana, though he emphasized Self-inquiry, never rejected the value of other yogic practices. He commonly extolled such practices as chanting the name of God, chanting Om and doing pranayama. He had regular Vedic chanting and pujas done at the ashram which continue today.

This traditional Advaitic view of different levels practice should not be confused with an approach that rejects all practices as useless. In this regard we can contrast traditional Advaita Vedanta, which Ramana followed, and the teachings of J. Krishnamurti, which is often the source of neo-Advaita's rejection of support practices.

Advaitic aspirants may not be attracted to all such Yoga practices and need not be, but they should not therefore regard them as of no value or discourage others from doing them. Until the mind is fully ripe or sattvic, such practices have their value, though we should use them as a means to Self-inquiry, not in exclusion of it. Advaita without Yoga, like Advaita without Vedanta often leaves the student without the proper tools to aid them along their sometimes long and difficult path.

The Advaitic Guru

Of course, the greatest possible distortions are relative to the Advaitic Guru. Since Advaita relies less on outer marks than other traditions, almost anyone can claim to be an Advaitic Guru, particularly once we have removed Advaita from any tradition of Vedanta or Yoga. In much of neo-Advaita, there is a rush to become gurus and give satsangs, even without much real study or practice. While certainly even a beginning student can teach the basics of Advaita for the benefit of others, to quickly set oneself up as a Self-realized guru raises a lot of questions. One can have an experience of the Self, while the full realization may yet be far away. Full Self-realization is neither easy nor common, under any circumstances.

Advaita does emphasize the advantage of instruction from a living Self-realized guru. Many people therefore think that they must have a living Self-realized guru or they can't practice Self-inquiry. This is not the case either. If one has access to genuine teachings, like those of Ramana, and follows them with humility and self-discipline, one can progress far on the path, which will lead them to further teachers and teachings as needed. On the other hand, in the rush to get a living Self-realized guru, students may get misled by those who claim Self-realization but may not really have it. Such false gurus cannot lead students very far and may take them in a wrong direction altogether.

A related misconception is that Advaitic realization can only be gained as a direct transmission from a living teacher, as if Self-realization depended upon a physical proximity to one who has it. Practice may get reduced to hanging out around the so-called guru and waiting for his glance! The presence of a real sadhak does indeed aid one's practice, but physical proximity to gurus is no

substitute for one's own inner practice. And physical proximity to those who don't have true realization may not bring much of benefit at all.

If Self-realization were as easy as coming into physical proximity with the teacher, most of the thousands who visited Ramana would have already become Self-realized. If the teaching had to come from a living guru only, then no teachings would be preserved after the guru died as these would no longer be relevant. So the realization behind the guru and the depth of his teaching is more important than whether he is in a physical body or not. A great guru leaves teachings for many generations and his influence is not limited by the lifetime of his physical body. A lesser guru, on the other hand, does not have much real transformative influence even if we spend a lifetime around him.

In addition, true Advaitic gurus are not always easy to find, nor do they always make themselves prominent in the external world. Like Ramana, many great gurus are quiet, silent and withdrawn. We can best find them by karmic affinity from our own practice, not by external searching or running after personalities.

Which Self is Being Examined?

Self-inquiry is an examination into our true nature, which is pure consciousness beyond body and mind. This is a very different process from psychological analysis, which is an inquiry into our personal, historical, ego-based individuality. Our true Self is our universal being, a consciousness present not only in humans but in animals, plants, the very Earth on which we live, the atmosphere, stars and planes of existence beyond the physical.

Another misconception in modern Advaita is turning Self-inquiry into an examination of the personal self, our fears and desires, and trying to make us feel better about it. Neo-Advaita in particular gets mixed up with western psychology and can get caught in examining the mind rather than going beyond the mind. Advaita is not about psychological happiness but about negating our psychology. Naturally some clarity about our psychology can be of initial help, but it is not the goal of practice.

Finding One's Own Path

The spiritual path is different for every individual. A true teacher teaches each student differently according to their unique nature. A true teacher will not necessarily teach Advaita to everyone, at all times or in the same manner. If we look at great gurus, their disciples are not simply imitations of them, but retain their own individuality. Note Ramana's main disciples Muruganar and Ganapati Muni in this regard.

The West has a tendency to standardize, stereotype, mass-produce and even franchise teachings. The neo-Advaita movement, like the western Yoga movement, is affected by this cultural compulsion, and often gives the same teachings en masse. True Advaita is not a teaching than can be given uniformly to people of all temperaments. It is often best pursued in solitude, silence and retreat and can never become a thing of the marketplace.

Certainly Advaita Vedanta is bound to continue as an important influence in not only individual sadhana but also in world thought. But it has many depths and subtleties that require great concentration and dedication in order to understand. Our initial goal should be steadiness in practice along with equanimity of mind, even in the absence of any great dramatic results, not quick enlightenment in the absence of practice!