

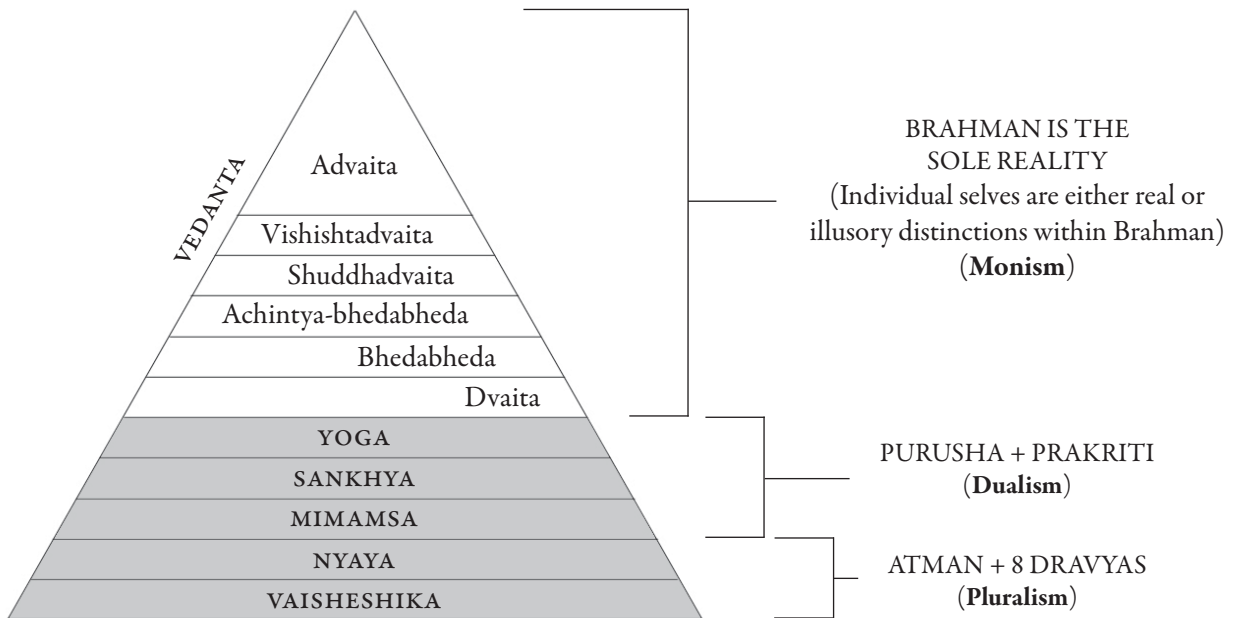
Four Basic Principles of Advaita Vedanta

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ADVAITA VEDANTA is the dominant and most well-known school of Indian philosophy. In Indian culture *darśana* is the word which corresponds to the Western idea of ‘philosophy’. *Darśana* literally means vision or insight. There are six *darśanas*, each of which provides a particular view of, or insight into, Reality. From the standpoint of the principle of harmony taught by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, the six *darśanas* may be regarded as forming a six-tiered pyramid, the tiers providing higher and higher views of Reality, with Vedanta as the topmost tier. Vedanta itself consists of several schools. These schools of Vedanta may also be visualized as forming a pyra-

mid with Advaita occupying its pinnacle.

Vedanta, however, is not a mere *view of Reality*; it is also a *way of life*—not ordinary life, but spiritual life. Its aim is to enable human beings to solve the existential problems of life, transcend human limitations, go beyond suffering, and attain supreme fulfilment and peace. Although there are six *darśanas*, Vedanta alone has remained the philosophy of the Hindu religious tradition from very ancient times to the present day. Of the different schools of Vedanta, Advaita has for its domain the mainstream Hinduism, whereas the other schools of Vedanta are associated with the different sects of Hinduism.



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Preliminary Considerations

Before taking up a study of the basic principles of Advaita Vedanta it is necessary to keep in mind two points. One is the distinction between Advaita as an experience and Advaita as a philosophy. As a direct transcendental spiritual experience, Advaita marks the highest point of spiritual realization a human being can attain. In that climactic experience the distinction between the individual and the cosmic is lost, and the distinctions between the knower, the thing known, and knowledge disappear. It is 'Advaita as experience' that forms the main theme of the Upanishads. 'Advaita as a philosophy' is a conceptual framework that attempts to explain how the impersonal Absolute appears as the phenomenal world and individual selves. The twelfth-century Advaita writer Sriharsha says in the introduction to his famous work *Khandana-khanda-khadya* that the purpose of philosophy, *śāstrārtha*, is to determine the nature of truth, *tattva-nirṇaya*, and victory over the opponent, *vādi-vijaya*. Acharya Shankara himself devotes a considerable part of his commentaries to refuting the views of opponents. In the present article we confine our discussion to the philosophical aspect of Advaita.

The second point to be kept in mind is that, although Advaita philosophy is built on the immutable and indestructible foundation of timeless truths and laws, its superstructure of concepts underwent several changes during different periods in the history of Hinduism. Four main phases may be seen in the development of Advaita philosophy.

i) Advaita of the Upanishads • As stated earlier, this is the experiential aspect of Advaita.

ii) Advaita of Shankara • It is well known that the edifice of Advaita philosophy, which towers over all other systems of philosophy, was built by Acharya Shankara in the eighth century. Shankara's main endeavour was to establish the non-dual nature of Brahman as the ultimate Reality. His most original contribution, however, was the introduction of the concept of a cosmic negative principle known as *maya* or *ajñāna*, ig-

norance, in order to explain the origin of the universe and the existence of duality in the phenomenal world without affecting the non-dual nature of Brahman.

iii) Post-Shankara Advaita • This phase extends over a long period, from the ninth century to the sixteenth. The writers on Advaita Vedanta of this period include eminent thinkers like Padmapada, Sureshwara, Vachaspati, Prakasha-tman, Vimuktatman, Sarvajnatman, Sriharsha, Chitsukha, Madhusudana, and others, who added several new concepts into the philosophical framework of Advaita Vedanta. During this period Advaita Vedanta split into three streams or schools. These are: (a) the Vartika school, based on the views of Sureshwara; (b) the Vivarana school, based on the views of Padmapada and Prakash-atman; and (c) the Bhamati school, based on the views of Vachaspati Mishra. The philosophy of Advaita underwent great refinement and intellectual sophistry during the post-Shankara phase. However, the focus of discussions shifted from Brahman to *maya* or *ajñāna*.

iv) The Modern Phase of Advaita • The modern phase in the development of Advaita Vedanta was inaugurated by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. They introduced several important changes in the understanding of Advaita in order to make it more relevant to the needs and conditions of the modern world. Some of the changes brought about by them are briefly stated below.

(a) The experiential aspect of Vedanta has come to be stressed, as it was during the Vedic period, more than the philosophical aspect.

(b) Harmony of the Advaitic view with the views of other schools of Vedanta has been established by accepting all views as representing different stages in the realization of Brahman. This has put an end to unnecessary polemical attacks and sectarian squabbles within the fold of Vedanta.

(c) The older form of Advaita gave greater importance to the transcendent aspect of Brahman, whereas the new view on Advaita gives greater importance to the immanent aspect.

(d) Swami Vivekananda found immense practical significance for Advaita Vedanta in solving the individual and collective problems of day-to-day life. Swamiji has shown how Advaitic knowledge can serve as the basis of morality, basis of inner strength and courage, and as the basis for social justice and equality as well. Above all, Advaita provides the basis for Sri Ramakrishna's message of 'service to man as service to God', *śivajñāne jīva-sevā*, which Swami Vivekananda popularized as the new gospel of social service. All the service activities of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission are inspired by this gospel of service.

(e) Swami Vivekananda has brought about the reconciliation of Advaita Vedanta with modern science. Furthermore, Swamiji showed that Vedanta itself is a science—the science of consciousness.

(f) Swamiji isolated the universal principles of Advaita Vedanta from the mythological, institutional, and cultic aspects of its parent matrix in Hinduism and converted the universal principles of Advaita into a universal religion—which in the modern idiom means universal spirituality—for all humanity.

The philosophical presuppositions and metaphysical underpinnings and implications of this 'Neo-Vedanta', which is better called 'Integral Vedanta', are yet to be worked out, or even studied, properly. Everything goes to show that the principles of Vedanta developed by Swami Vivekananda are likely to have a great impact on world thought, global culture, and human progress in the coming decades and centuries of the third millennium.

The aim of the present article is to explicate the main principles of Advaita Vedanta developed during the post-Shankara period. A proper understanding of these basic principles is necessary to understand and evaluate the status, influence, and possibilities of Vedanta in the modern world and the contributions made to it by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

Post-Shankara Advaita Vedanta rests on four foundational principles: (i) the illusoriness of *jīvatva*, individuality; (ii) a two-level reality;

(iii) *ajñāna* as the conjoint cause of the world; and (iv) the non-duality of Consciousness.

The Illusoriness of Individuality

By Advaita is meant the non-duality of Brahman, or rather the denial of duality in Brahman. The central concept of Vedanta *darśana* is that Brahman is the ultimate cause of the universe and the ultimate Reality. This is accepted by all schools of Vedanta—dualistic as well as non-dualistic. What then is the difference between Dvaita and Advaita? One basic difference is that according to dualistic schools individuality is real and persists even in the state of *mukti*, whereas in Advaita individuality is unreal and does not persist in the state of *mukti*. Shankara says: 'What is called *jīva* is not absolutely different from Brahman. Brahman itself, being conditioned by adjuncts such as *buddhi*, intellect, and the like, comes to be called "doer" and "experiencer".'¹ 'The difference between the individual self and the supreme Self is due to the presence of limiting adjuncts, such as the body, which are set up by names and forms and are created by *avidyā*; there is actually no difference.'²

In the dualistic schools the word 'Atman' is used to refer only to the individual self, and not to Brahman. When the Atman identifies itself with mind and body, it is called *jīva*. In the state of *mukti* this identification disappears, but the Atman, although it becomes almost similar to Brahman, remains distinct and separate from Brahman. Here, the relationship between Atman and Brahman is an organic relationship, like that between the part and the whole. The type of difference that exists between Brahman and the individual selves is known as *svagata-bheda*.³

Advaita denies *svagata-bheda* in Brahman. According to Advaita, in the state of *mukti* the Atman does not remain distinct from Brahman but becomes one with it. In fact, there is no distinction between Atman and Brahman; as soon as the identification with mind and body disappears, the distinction between Atman and Brahman also disappears. Hence, Advaitins use the terms Atman

and Brahman interchangeably.

We may conclude this section with a statement made by Krishnachandra Bhattacharya, one of the original thinkers and great scholars of Indian philosophy of the twentieth century: “The illusoriness of the individual self is apparently the central notion of Advaita Vedanta. Every vital tenet of the philosophy—Brahman as the sole reality, the object as false, Māyā as neither real nor unreal, Ívara as Brahman in reference to Māyā, *mokṣa* (liberation) through knowledge of Brahman and as identity with Brahman—may be regarded as an elaboration of this single notion.”⁴

A Two-level Reality

The most crucial problem in Advaita Vedanta is to explain the coexistence of two entirely different and incompatible entities, Brahman and the world. Brahman is infinite Consciousness, which is *nirguṇa*, absolutely devoid of all attributes. What Brahman is cannot be expressed in words. The Upanishadic definition ‘Brahman is Truth, Knowledge, Infinity’⁵ is only a symbolic indicator, *lakṣana*, not a true description, of the real nature of Brahman. The infinite, the indivisible, the attributeless cannot be characterized in terms of finite categories. As Sri Ramakrishna used to say, ‘Brahman is the only thing which has never become *ucchiṣṭa*, that is, defiled by human mouth’. Brahman is the sole Reality. The Upanishads declare: ‘All this is Brahman’; ‘There is no multiplicity here.’⁶

However, the Upanishads and *Brahma Sutra* also regard Brahman as the cause of the universe. All schools of Vedanta hold that Brahman is both the material cause, *upādāna-kāraṇa*, and the efficient cause, *nimitta kāraṇa*, of the world. The world, which is material in nature, consists of countless living and non-living beings, is ever changing, and is characterized by dualities such as heat and cold, joy and pain; it is, in every way, the opposite of Brahman. How can two totally dissimilar and incompatible entities, Brahman and the world, have any causal relationship at all? If Brahman is the sole reality, how and where can the world exist?

The common answer, based on a superficial understanding of Advaita, is that Brahman alone is real whereas the world is unreal, and the causal relationship between the two is also illusory. This kind of statement is usually nothing more than parrotting without any deep thinking. How can we regard as illusory this unimaginably complex world which almost all people perceive to be real? When we actually see an illusion, such as mistaking a rope for a snake, it takes only a little time for us to realize that it is an illusion. Moreover, the snake seen on a rope does not bite, the water seen in a mirage does not slake our thirst. But the world we live in, which gives us innumerable types of joyful and painful experiences, challenges, changes, relationships, endless events, quest for meaning, and so on, cannot be dismissed so easily as illusory.

Shankara’s solution to the problem of the coexistence and cause-and-effect relation between non-dual Brahman and the finite world was to posit a two-level reality. One level is *pāramārthika-sattā*, absolute Reality; this is what Brahman is. The other is *vyāvahārika-sattā*, empirical or relative reality; this is what the world is. But then, how can there be two kinds of reality? It is clear that the term ‘reality’ needs proper understanding.

Empirical Level • Whatever is experienced directly through the senses, *pratyakṣa*, is true and real, at least as long as the experience lasts. Our senses have limitations, we may have wrong perceptions, but science and technology enable us to overcome the deceptions of the senses and gain correct knowledge. The acquisition of enormous power by the application of the knowledge gained through the senses itself is the pragmatic proof of the reality of the world. What billions of people have directly experienced for thousands of years cannot be dismissed as unreal. Thus, from the standpoint of direct empirical experience, the world is real.

But the authoritative scriptures known as the Upanishads declare Brahman to be the sole reality. Moreover, great thinkers like Nagarjuna have, through arguments, shown that the world we see is unreal.

This leads to the untenable proposition that the world is both real and unreal, which is self-contradictory. If the world is *sat*, real, it cannot be *asat*, unreal, and vice versa. From this contradiction the Advaitin concludes that the world is different from both *sat* and *asat*; it is *sad-asad-vilakṣaṇa*. Such a fact defies the laws of logical thinking; hence, it is *anirvacanīya*. Another word used in the same sense is *mithyā*. In common parlance *mithyā* means illusion or falsehood, but in Advaita Vedanta it means something 'mysterious'. The terms *mithyā*, *anirvacanīya*, and *sad-asad-vilakṣaṇa* are treated as more or less synonymous; they describe what is known as *vyāvahārika-sattā*. It is Brahman appearing as the world under the influence of its mysterious power known as *mayā* or *ajñāna*.

Absolute Level • Brahman remains in its true nature as non-dual, infinite awareness at the higher level of reality known as *pāramārthika-sattā*. It is only at this level that the world appears to be unreal or illusory.

Absolute Reality is also experienced directly. Compared to this experience, the experience of empirical reality may be described as indirect, because it is mediated by the sense organs. The supersensuous experience of absolute Reality is immediate, *aparokṣa*.⁷ This is to be distinguished from *pratyakṣa*, sense-experience. The *aparokṣa* experience, which takes place without the mediation of the senses, is the result of Brahman's self-revelation. Brahman reveals itself because it is self-luminous. Brahman is of the nature of pure Consciousness, which shines in the hearts of all as the Atman. Everything is known through consciousness, but consciousness cannot be known as an object. Consciousness is self-luminous; it reveals itself—it is *svaprakāśa*. The well-known definition of *svaprakāśa* given by the thirteenth-century Advaita writer Cit-sukha says that 'self-revelation is the capability to give rise to immediate self-awareness without its becoming objective knowledge'.⁸

Shankara's theory of two levels of reality, the *pāramārthika* and the *vyāvahārika*, is a distinct and unique feature of Advaita Vedanta. Sri Rama-

krishna has expressed the same idea in his own simple way as *nitya* and *līla*. This two-level theory is often compared to Nagarjuna's theory of two levels of truth: *samvṛti satya*, conventional truth, and *paramārtha satya*, absolute truth. There is no doubt that Shankara was influenced by Nagarjuna's dialectic, but the former went far ahead and built a mighty philosophical edifice by integrating Nagarjuna's dialectical approach into *brahma-mīmāṃsā*, the philosophy of Brahman. There are, however, basic differences between the two-level theory of Shankara and that of Nagarjuna. In the first place, Nagarjuna's theory pertains to truth in general, whereas Shankara's theory covers the whole of reality. Secondly, Nagarjuna's approach is mostly negative and is based solely on logic, whereas Shankara's approach is positive and keeps Vedantic scriptures at the forefront. Again, Nagarjuna denies the reality of the world even at the empirical level, whereas Shankara denies the reality of the world only at the level of the Absolute. Lastly, Shankara regards the world as something superimposed on Brahman. This idea of *adhyāsa*, superimposition, is Shankara's original idea which is absent in the philosophy of Nagarjuna or even in Vijnanavada Buddhism.

Unreality of the World • Shankara's main interest was in establishing the sole reality of Brahman, and it was in support of this that he attempted to show the ultimate unreality of the world, which he did mainly by quoting scriptures. But for post-Shankara Advaitins, the unreality of the world and the theory of *ajñāna* became the chief concern because of the need to defend these doctrines against the polemical attacks of rival schools.

The crucial problem facing post-Shankara Advaitins was to establish the unreality of the phenomenal world. Appealing to transcendental experience was of no use as many of the opponents, for example the Naiyayikas, did not believe in it and, moreover, since transcendental experience is subjective, each person may claim his own experience to be the true one. Therefore, the unreality of the world had to be established at the empirical level itself. For

this the first task was to define 'reality'. What is the criterion to distinguish reality from unreality?

Two lines of reasoning are followed by Advaitins to establish the unreality of the phenomenal world. One is to equate impermanence with unreality, and the other to equate objectivity with unconsciousness.

(i) *Anitya* is *asatya*: The ultimate Reality, known as Brahman, is unchanging and eternal. From this it is natural to conclude that whatever is changing must be impermanent, and whatever is impermanent must be unreal—*anitya* is *asatya*. This equation was, however, first worked out by Nagarjuna in the second century. In *Mulamadhyamaka-karika* he states: 'That which did not exist in the beginning and will not exist in the future, how can it be said to exist in the middle?'⁹ Gaudapada, in his *Mandukya Karika*, expresses exactly the same idea.¹⁰

Furthermore, Nagarjuna showed the contradictory nature of all dharmas, all phenomena and experiences. What is contradictory cannot be true. Thus, contradictoriness became a criterion of falsity. From this the Advaitins derived the idea that non-contradictoriness, *abādhitatva*, is the test and criterion of truth or true knowledge.¹¹

Impermanence itself is a form of contradiction. The external world ceases to exist for a person who is in the dream, *svapna*, or deep-sleep, *susupta*, states. The experiences of dream and deep-sleep states contradict the experiences of the waking state. Hence, the external world must be regarded as unreal. Brahman as the inner Self, *pratyagātman*, always abides within us as the unchanging witness, *sākṣin*. It abides even in deep sleep; this is known from the fact that after a deep sleep we are able to recollect, 'I have had a sound sleep; and I did not know anything.' The dream and deep-sleep states do not negate or contradict awareness or consciousness. Consciousness as Atman-Brahman is unchanging, unbroken, ever present; therefore it alone is real, it is the only Reality.

In this connection it should be noted that Advaitins accept even the dream state to be real as long as the experience of the dream lasts. It belongs

to a third kind of reality known as *prātibhāsika-sattā*, illusory existence. The dream becomes unreal only when a person wakes up. Similarly, the world appears to be real until a person awakens to the realization of Brahman.¹²

It should also be pointed out here that the other schools of Vedānta do not accept Shankara's concept of a two-level or three-level reality, nor the unreality of the world. They accept the world as impermanent, no doubt, but for them, impermanence does not mean unreality.

(ii) *Cit* and *jada*: The second line of reasoning that Advaitins follow in order to prove the unreality of the world is based on the antinomic nature of the subject and the object. A major premise of the Advaitins is that consciousness is always the subject; it can never be objectified. It is a fundamental principle that the subject and the object can never be the same. In order to know an object we need consciousness; but to know consciousness nothing is necessary, because consciousness is self-luminous, *svayam-jyoti*, self-revealing. This means, all objects belong to the realm of the unconscious, *jada*.

Chitsukha argues that there can be no relation between the subject, which is pure consciousness, and the object, which is *jada*. In fact, the subject-object relationship is false. However, Chitsukha also shows that the world is false only when the Absolute is realized.¹³

(To be concluded)

Notes and References

1. *Na hi jīvo nāmātyanta-bhinno brahmaṇaḥ ... buddhy-ādy-upādhi-kṛtaṁ tu viśeṣam-āśritya brahmaiva san-jīvaḥ kartā bhoktā cety-ucyate*. Shankaracharya's commentary on *Brahma Sutra*, I.1.31.
2. *Vijñānātma-paramātmānor-avidyā-pratyupasthāpita-nāmarūpa-racita-dehādy-upādhi-nimitto bheda na pāramārthikaḥ* (1.4.22).
3. In treatises on Vedānta three kinds of *bheda*, difference, are mentioned: (i) *Vijātiya-bheda*: the difference between objects of different kinds or species; as for example the difference between a tree and a cow. The difference between Puruṣha and Prakṛiti in Sāṅkhya philosophy is of this kind. The difference between God and the souls in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions is also of

this kind. Just as the potter and the pot can never be the same, so also the Creator and creature can never be the same. This is *not* the type of difference between the individual Self and the Supreme Self accepted in Dvaita schools of Vedanta. (ii) *Sajātiya-bheda*: the difference between objects of the same kind or species; as for instance the differences between two mango trees. The difference between two Purushas in Sankhya philosophy, and the difference between two liberated selves in Ramanuja's philosophy, are of this type. (iii) *Svagata-bheda*: the differences found among the parts of the same object; as for instance the difference among the branches, leaves, and flowers of a mango tree, or the differences between rind, pulp, and seeds of a bel fruit. This is the type of difference between Atman, the individual Self, and Brahman in the dualistic schools of Ramanuja, Madhva, and others. This kind of difference is necessary for the soul to adore and love God and enjoy the bliss of Brahman. But Shankara denies even *svagata-bheda* in Brahman; according to him the individual Self attains oneness with Brahman, so much so that it becomes Bliss itself.

4. Krishnachandra Bhattacharya, 'The Advaita and Its Spiritual Significance', in *The Cultural Heritage*

of India, 7 vols (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2001), 3.245.

5. *Satyam jñānam-anantaṁ brahma*, *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.1.1.
 6. *Sarvaṁ khalvidam brahma*, *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 3.14.1; *Neha nānāsti kiñcana*, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 4.4.19; *Katha Upanishad*, 2.1.11.
 7. *Yat-sākṣād-āparokṣād-brahma*, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 3.4.1-2; also 3.5.1.
 8. *Avedyatve sati āparokṣa-vyavahāra-yogyatā*; Chit-sukhacharya, *Tattvapradīpika* (Nirnayasagar), 9.
 9. *Naivāgraṁ nāvaram yasya tasya madhyam kuto bhavet*; Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamaka Karika*, 11.2.
 10. Gaudapada, *Mandukya Karika*, 2.5.
 11. *Abādhitārtha-viśayaka-jñānam pramā*; see Dharmaraja Adhvarindra, *Vedānta Paribhāṣā*, trans. Swami Madhavananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2004), 4.
 12. See Shankaracharya's commentary on *Brahma Sutra*, 2.1.14: '*Sarva-vyavahārāṇām-eva prāg-brahmātmatā-vijñānāt-satyatvopapatteḥ svapna-vyavahārasyeva prāk-prabodhāt*'; all empirical usages are true before the realization of Brahman as the Self, just as the experiences in the dream state are true before one wakes up.'
 13. *Tattvapradīpika*, 40-3.

Drg-Dṛśya-Viveka

Vedanta philosophy describes at great length the distinction between the 'Seer' (dṛg) and the 'seen' (dṛśya), the Subject (viśayī) and the object (viśaya), the 'Ego' (aham) and the 'non-Ego' (idam). The 'Seer' is the perceiver, identical with the Subject and the Ego, and is of the nature of Consciousness and Intelligence. The 'seen' is the thing perceived, identical with the object and the non-Ego, and is insentient by nature. The 'Seer' is all sentiency; therefore the 'Seer' and the 'seen', the Subject and the object, the 'Ego' and the 'non-Ego', are mutually opposed and must never be identified with each other. If one associates the attributes of the Subject with the object, or, vice versa, those of the object with the Subject, one is a victim of an illusory superimposition, the result of one's own ignorance. Yet it is a matter of common experience that in daily practical life people do not distinguish between the Subject and the object, but superimpose the attributes of the one upon the other. Through ignorance they confuse the Subject with the

object. This confusion is observable in every action and thought of our daily life, and is expressed in such common statements as 'This is I' or 'This is mine,' whereby we identify the 'I,' which is of the nature of Pure Consciousness, with such material objects as the body, the mind, the senses, house, or country. On account of the same confusion we associate the Eternal Self with such characteristics of the body as birth, growth, disease, and death; and this confusion is expressed in such statements as 'I am born,' 'I am growing,' 'I am ill,' or 'I am dying.'

Discrimination between the 'Seer' and the 'seen' is the road leading to the realization of Truth. The 'Seer' is the unchangeable and homogeneous Consciousness, or the knowing principle. It is the perceiver, the Subject, the real 'Ego.' The 'seen' is what is perceived; it is outside the 'Seer' and therefore identical with the object. It is matter, non-Self, and 'non-Ego.' The 'seen' is multiple and changeable.

—Swami Nikhilananda, *Self-Knowledge*, 43-4