

A history of Hinduism Part 2: the non-dualistic Advaita Vedānta

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While Satya naturally hoped to persuade me that his interpretation of Hinduism was true, he did not initially refer to it as *Advaita Vedānta*, but simply presented it as Hindu thought. When I finally heard the term, my own naive understanding of the term "non-dual" amounted to little more than "not two," which I took to include the possibilities of one, three, or any other number. Only later, after many conversations with him and further reading on my own, did I realize that he had been describing one particular philosophical school within Hinduism: one in which Brahman alone is ultimately real, and in which even the gods are understood as manifestations of Brahman. My own interest throughout was not in evaluating the truth of the doctrine, but in understanding it as accurately as possible. Our discussions were therefore less a debate than an extended exploration of the ideas themselves.

This is the second of three documents explaining the Hindu religion to a lay audience. The first of the three traced the religion from the time of the Pontic-Caspian Steppe culture, through the Vedic Era, the Kuru Kingdom, Maurya Empire, and the Gupta Empire, ending at the time of Ādi Śaṅkara. This second examines the most interesting form of Hinduism, the coherently parsimonious metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta introduced by Ādi Śaṅkara. This is likely the most elegant of all religious doctrines, but it is still unfalsifiable and its impersonal, deindividualizing and dispassionate nature makes it unattractive to the vast majority of adherents of Hinduism. The third will then examine how Advaita Vedānta impacted the worship of the other Hindu gods, with a specific focus on the metaphysics and understanding of Vaiṣṇavism (the worship of Viṣṇu and his avatāras), Śaivism (the worship of Śiva in his various forms), Śāktism (the worship of the Goddess Śakti in manifestations such as Durgā and Kālī), and Smārta tradition (the worship of a quintet of deities: Śiva, Viṣṇu, Śakti, Gaṇeśa, and Sūrya).

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1 Introduction

This work explores one particular and influential interpretation of the ancient Vedas and Upaniṣads—that of Ādi Śaṅkara (*AH-dee SHUN-ka-rah*)¹, a philosopher traditionally placed in the eighth century,² whose non-dualistic vision, known as Advaita Vedānta (*uhd-VAI-tuh vay-DAH-uh*), offered a radical and elegant re-reading of over a thousand years of religious literature. His insight was not a rejection of the past, but a luminous distillation of it—a clarifying synthesis that reaffirmed and transformed the Hindu metaphysical landscape. In the centuries since, Śaṅkara’s teachings have deeply shaped the development of Hindu philosophy and theology, and many later schools—even those that differ doctrinally—bear traces of his influence. While only a small minority of Hindus today explicitly identify with Advaita Vedānta as a formal path, its core ideas have permeated the language and concepts of many traditions, particularly among spiritual teachers, philosophical lineages, and non-ritualistic movements.

It is important to remember that Śaṅkara was not introducing new scripture, but rather offering a compelling interpretation of texts that were already revered. What made his vision so powerful was that it resolved tension, removed metaphysical clutter, and pointed the seeker inward—not toward ritual or heavens, but toward direct self-knowledge.

For those unfamiliar with Sanskrit, one caveat must be addressed: many critical terms in this tradition are linguistically similar yet conceptually distinct. What follows is a brief glossary of some of the more similar terms, each of which appear in this work. Attention to their pronunciation and meaning will help avoid confusion.

Śaṅkara (<i>SHUN-ka-rah</i>)	The philosopher who systematized Advaita Vedānta.
Saṃsāra (<i>SOM-saa-rah</i>)	The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth within the illusion of multiplicity.
Saṃskāra (<i>SUM-skaa-rah</i>)	Mental impressions or latent tendencies carried by the jīva.
Ahaṃkāra (<i>uh-HUM-kaa-rah</i>)	Ego (doership).
Advaita (<i>uhd-VAI-tuh</i>)	Non-duality; the teaching that there is no real separation.
Avidyā (<i>uh-VID-yah</i>)	Ignorance; the root error that veils true knowledge.
Ātman (<i>AHT-mun</i>)	The true Self; not the personality, but pure awareness.

¹In this document, I use standard IAST transliteration for Sanskrit followed by a rough pronunciation guide. Read a as a short “uh” (about) and ā as a long “ah” (father); i/ī as “i” (bit) vs long “ee” (machine); u/ū as “u” (put) vs long “oo” (flute). The vowels e, ai, o, au are always long: e as in they, ai as in aisle, o as in go, au as in cow. The dotted ṛ is a quick “ri” (as in the cri of crit). A dot above a letter marks nasalization: ṁ (anusvāra) adds a light nasal hum—think “m/n through the nose” before the next sound: saṃsāra ≈ “sum-SAH-rah.” A dot below marks a retroflex (tongue curled back): ṭ, ḍ, ṣ sound like a slightly back t, d, sh. The accent marks over ś and ṣ both yield “sh” (palatal vs retroflex); plain s is like English s. A final ḥ (visarga) is a soft breathy h echoing the preceding vowel (duḥkha ≈ “DOOK-huh”). Consonant clusters with an h—th, dh, bh, ph, kh, gh—are aspirated (a puff of air), not the English “th” of this. Hold the long vowels (ā ī ū e o ai au) just a beat longer than the short ones, and you will be close enough for comfortable reading.

²Some modern scholars propose earlier dates for Śaṅkara’s life, ranging from the late 5th to early 8th century CE. The eighth-century placement remains the conventional view, based on traditional accounts and relative chronology.

Throughout the exposition, these terms as well as others are introduced gently and in context, with phonetic guides and definitions. The goal is clarity—to illuminate rather than obscure—and to reveal why this singular philosophical system continues to resonate so deeply, even across cultures and centuries. At the end, a glossary is provided, but we will begin with an explanation of Ādi Śaṅkara’s interpretation of Brahman and build from there.

2 Brahman

Brahman (pronounced *bruh-muhn*) is the infinite, indivisible, eternal reality that is unchanging, self-luminous, and the ground of all being and consciousness. It is not a substance among substances, nor a cause among causes, but the sole ontological reality (what exists in the deepest and most fundamental sense, for in philosophy, *ontology* is the study of being and existence, and not all things that appear to exist are ontologically equal—for something with ontological reality exists independently and necessarily, forming the foundation upon which all else depends).

In the Advaita Vedānta tradition of Śaṅkara, Brahman is often described using the triple expression *sat-cit-ānanda*—being, consciousness, and bliss. However, these are not literal attributes or qualities that Brahman possesses. Śaṅkara treats them as *lakṣaṇas* (indicators), inferred from the negation of all non-Self entities in the method of *neti neti* (“not this, not this”). They serve to point the mind toward what remains when all changing, finite, and conditioned things are removed. In this way, they help describe the *natureless* nature of Brahman—not what it *is* in any positive sense, but what it *is not*.

- **sat** (*sut*): Meaning “being” or “existence”; it refers to that which remains constant and unchanging—the unshakable reality behind all appearances.
- **cit** (*chit*): Meaning “consciousness”; it denotes awareness itself, free from content, not tied to any individual mind or act of perception.
- **ānanda** (*AH-nun-duh*): Meaning “bliss” or “absolute fulfillment”; not an emotion or state, but the peace and plenitude that remains when duality is transcended.
- **ātman** (*AHT-muhn*): Meaning “self”; the innermost essence of a person, which in Advaita Vedānta is not other than Brahman.

Brahman is without parts, attributes, or limitations. It transcends all categories of thought and speech, and yet it is that by which all thought and speech are made possible. In truth, it cannot be grasped as an object at all—it is the ever-present subject, the very reality of the seeker.

3 Māyā

Māyā (pronounced *MAH-yah*) is not a substance or a force, but the mysterious appearance that causes the one undivided reality, *Brahman*, to seem like a world of separate objects, beings, and experiences. It overlays Brahman with apparent form, difference, and multiplicity, while never actually dividing or altering it. Through Māyā, the true self (*ātman* or *AHT-muhn*) appears as if it were countless distinct selves or souls (*jīva* or *JEE-vuh*), each seemingly confined to a particular body. This seeming division gives rise to experience, identity, and interaction—but from the standpoint of ultimate truth, these distinctions are not absolutely real. They are said to be *mithyā* (*MIT-thyah*)—neither fully real nor utterly unreal, but conditionally true, depending entirely on Brahman as their underlying support.

The appearance of multiplicity extends beyond living beings. Māyā also presents the inanimate world—rocks, rivers, stars, and all material objects—as if they were discrete, independent entities. But these, too, are appearances shaped by name (*nāma* or *NAH-mah*) and form (*rūpa* or *ROO-pah*). They function within experience, but do not possess separate existence. What seems solid and inert is ultimately grounded in the same indivisible reality. Thus, Māyā does not negate the world, but reframes it: it is not a falsehood to be rejected, but a provisional truth to be seen through. When Brahman is known, the world is no longer denied—but it is no longer misunderstood. All names and forms resolve into their unchanging essence: pure, infinite Being.

- **māyā** (*MAH-yah*): The illusion of multiplicity and change that makes the non-dual reality, Brahman, appear as a world of separate forms. Though not ultimately real, it is not mere falsehood, but a dependent appearance—called *mithyā*—dispelled by true knowledge.
- **nāma** (*NAH-mah*): Meaning “name”; the conceptual label assigned to an object or being. In Advaita Vedānta, name is one half of the illusion that gives rise to apparent multiplicity—it marks out distinction where none truly exists.
- **rūpa** (*ROO-pah*): Meaning “form” or “shape”; the perceived structure or appearance of a thing. Along with *nāma*, it constitutes the superimposed identity that veils the formless and undivided nature of Brahman.

4 Jīva

Jīva (pronounced *JEE-vuh*) refers to the individual locus of consciousness—the apparent self that seems to dwell within a particular living being. A jīva is not merely something that is alive, nor is it synonymous with biological life; rather, it is the reflection or projection of the undivided self (*ātman*—*AHT-muhn*), as it appears localized, personal, and separate. Every jīva is, in truth, Brahman, but experienced as a finite, individual consciousness. The jīva is characterized by awareness, memory, desire, and identity, and it persists through experiences of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep.

The concept of a *jīva* must be distinguished from the mere biological functioning of an organism. Mammals, for example, possess complex nervous systems and display sophisticated behaviors, but what qualifies an entity as a *jīva* is not complexity or intelligence, but the presence of an experiencing self. Even a simple organism, if it possesses the experience of being—however dim or limited—is a *jīva*. Thus, the *jīva* is defined by the inner light of consciousness, not by evolutionary development, physical form, or sensory capability.

- ***jīva*** (*JEE-vuh*): The individualized locus of consciousness—the apparent self that experiences itself as a distinct entity. Though it is in essence identical with *Brahman*, it appears to be separate and personal. A *jīva* is defined not by biology, but by the presence of conscious awareness.
- ***prāṇi*** (*PRAA-nee*): A living being—any organism that possesses *prāṇa* (vital force or life-energy). This includes all forms of biological life, from microbes to humans. Not all *prāṇis* are necessarily *jīvas* in systems that distinguish between unconscious life and conscious selves.
- ***cetana*** (*CHAY-tuh-nuh*): Sentience or conscious awareness—the quality of being aware or capable of experience. All *jīvas* are *cetana*, but not all *prāṇis* may possess clearly manifest *cetana*. In Advaita Vedānta, *cetana* is ultimately a reflection of *Brahman*’s consciousness.

5 Avidyā

Avidyā (pronounced *uh-VID-yah*) is the fundamental cause of the mistaken perception that the *jīva* (*JEE-vuh*) is a distinct and separate being, independent from the infinite reality of *Brahman* (*bruh-muhn*). It is not merely a lack of factual information, but a deep-seated, experiential misapprehension of the true nature of the self. Avidyā is the false identification of the self (*ātman*—*AHT-muhn*) with the body, the senses, the mind, the intellect, and personal memories—all of which are temporary, changing, and not truly the self.

Through the lens of avidyā, the *jīva* thinks, “I am this body,” or “I am this personality,” or “I am different from others.” But in truth, the *jīva* is none other than *Brahman*—the unchanging, indivisible, eternal ground of all being. This mistaken identity arises because avidyā veils the reality of *Brahman*, causing the limitless to appear limited, the formless to seem embodied, and the one to seem many.

This ignorance is not a delusion in the sense of hallucination or insanity, but a fundamental confusion between what is real and what merely appears to be. It is like mistaking a rope for a snake in dim light: the rope was never a snake, but until the light reveals it, the fear and reactions associated with the snake feel entirely real. In the same way, avidyā causes fear, desire, attachment, pride, aversion, and suffering—all of which arise from the illusion of separateness.

The consequences of *avidyā* are profound: the *jīva* remains caught in cycles of limitation and suffering, believing itself to be bound, vulnerable, and incomplete. Yet in reality, it was never anything but Brahman. This bondage persists only so long as the ignorance remains. When true knowledge—*jñāna* (*GYAA-nuh*)—arises, the veil is lifted, and the *jīva* realizes its true nature. With this realization, the illusion of separateness dissolves, and what remains is the recognition that there was never any division, only the One, appearing as many.

- *avidyā* (*uh-VID-yah*): Meaning “ignorance” or “misapprehension”; the root cause of the *jīva*’s mistaken belief that it is separate from Brahman. *Avidyā* is not simply the absence of knowledge, but the active confusion between what is real and what is apparent—such as identifying the self with the body or mind rather than the true self, *ātman*.
- *jñāna* (*GYAA-nuh*): Meaning “knowledge” or “wisdom”; specifically, the direct realization of the identity between *ātman* and Brahman. *Jñāna* dispels *avidyā* like light dispels darkness, revealing that the individual self is not truly separate, but always has been the one undivided reality.

6 *Vāsanā*

Vāsanā (pronounced *VAH-suh-nah*) refers to subtle tendencies or latent desires that arise within the *jīva* (*JEE-vuh*) as a result of its misapprehension of reality. Under the influence of *avidyā* (*uh-VID-yah*), the *jīva* no longer knows itself as *Brahman* (*bruh-muhn*), the infinite and undivided self, and instead experiences itself as a separate, limited being. This false perception gives rise to the sense of incompleteness—of needing to attain, avoid, preserve, or become—and from this sense arises *vāsanā*, the subtle force of desire.

These *vāsanās* drive the *jīva* (*JEE-vuh*) to act, and every action leaves behind a subtle impression—a trace that influences the *jīva*’s future tendencies and patterns of thought. So long as these actions are performed under the veil of ignorance (*avidyā*), they reinforce the illusion of separateness and deepen the habit of desire and striving. In this way, *vāsanā* leads to a repeating cycle: desire gives rise to action, action leaves impressions, and those impressions give rise to new desires. This continual repetition sustains the *jīva*’s ongoing participation in the illusory world projected by *Māyā* (*MAH-yah*), creating the appearance of a journey through changing forms and experiences.

Although these tendencies appear to belong to the *jīva* (*JEE-vuh*), they are part of the illusion and not real in the absolute sense. They arise only as long as the *jīva* remains under the influence of *avidyā* (*uh-VID-yah*), mistaking itself for something limited and separate. In truth, the *jīva* has never been other than *Brahman* (*bruh-muhn*), and these desires—however compelling they seem—are mere appearances within the field of illusion created by *Māyā* (*MAH-yah*). The power of *vāsanā* endures only so long as this mistaken identity persists.

7 Maturity of the Jīva and the levels of embodied life

Although all *jīvas* are, in essence, nothing but *Brahman* (*bruh-muhn*), they appear with differing degrees of inner maturity within the illusory world projected by *Māyā* (*MAH-yah*). This maturity is not a difference in being, but in the subtle tendencies that shape how the *jīva* perceives itself and what it seeks. Less mature *jīvas* remain entangled in basic impulses—attachment, fear, instinct, and simple pleasure—while more mature *jīvas* begin to exhibit restraint, reflection, empathy, and a search for deeper understanding. These tendencies influence how each *jīva* attaches itself to a particular form of life within the illusion.

Classical Advaita Vedānta does not propose a strict metaphysical ranking of life forms. Śaṅkara refers to different embodiments primarily to illustrate the effects of karma, not to describe an evolutionary or hierarchical ascent. However, as a didactic tool to convey the inward maturity necessary for liberation, some later Advaitic teachers and allied traditions have described the apparent world of living beings in terms of a spectrum of embodiment. This should not be taken as a literal ladder of souls progressing through biological forms, but as a symbolic way of showing how certain forms more readily support self-inquiry and spiritual discernment.

Traditional Advaita is less concerned with cataloguing sentience across biological forms than with the underlying truth that wherever conscious experience appears, it is Brahman alone that shines. However, other Indian traditions such as Jainism and Vaiśeṣika develop more detailed classifications of living beings—from those with five senses to those with only one (such as certain plants and microbes). These taxonomies offer alternate models for interpreting the scope of embodiment and awareness within illusion.

The world of beings, as it appears within *Māyā*, presents a diversity of embodiments through which the *jīva* experiences itself. At the simpler end are organisms limited to immediate sensation and instinctual reaction—such as insects or simple animals. More developed forms, such as mammals, exhibit social awareness, memory, emotion, and rudimentary learning. Among all embodied forms, human beings are uniquely capable of abstract thought, self-reflection, and ethical reasoning. These qualities make the human form especially suited for recognizing the illusion of separateness. Beyond the human level are forms of even greater subtlety and awareness—traditionally called *devas* (*DAY-vuhs*). These beings do not possess gross physical bodies like humans or animals, but instead appear within the illusion as possessing refined faculties of perception and elevated capacities of mind and presence. In each case, the *jīva* is drawn to the type of embodiment that reflects the maturity of its inner tendencies, and it experiences the world through that particular body–mind–ego configuration. Yet in truth, none of these forms define the *jīva*, which remains always and only Brahman.

Embodied Form (within Māyā)	Characteristics of the Form	Maturity of the Jīva Drawn to It
Insects and simple organisms	Operate through instinct and basic sensation; limited perception and no reflective awareness.	Dominated by raw survival impulses—attraction, aversion, hunger, and avoidance of harm. Little or no self-awareness.
Animals (complex)	Display emotion, memory, learning, and social behavior; limited conceptual understanding.	Motivated by attachment, fear, competition, loyalty, and emotional bonds; beginning stages of moral-emotional development.
Humans	Capable of abstract thought, moral reasoning, language, and self-reflection; strong sense of identity and agency.	Exhibiting <i>vāsanās</i> of inquiry, restraint, compassion, and the potential to question the nature of self and reality.
Devas (<i>DAY-vuhs</i>)	Subtle, radiant forms of refined perception and experience; not limited by gross physicality.	Possessing refined desires, aesthetic sensitivity, and higher mental capacities; drawn to elevated pleasures and expansive identity, yet still within illusion.

Table 1: Embodied forms in Māyā and the maturity of the Jīva (as a symbolic teaching model)

8 The human embodiment and the body–mind–ego complex

Among all the embodied forms that appear within Māyā, the human form occupies a unique position. It is neither the most subtle nor the most powerful, yet it stands at a critical threshold. Unlike simpler beings, the human is capable of sustained reflection, ethical discernment, and abstract inquiry. And unlike more refined beings, traditionally referred to as *devas* (*DAY-vuhs*), the human is not immersed in elevated pleasure or subtle identity. The human condition balances suffering and aspiration, limitation and insight—making it particularly suited for recognizing the illusion of separateness. Because of this, the human embodiment is seen in Advaita Vedānta as the the most conducive to realizing that what the jīva takes to be itself—the Ātman—is in truth not separate from Brahman.

Within this human form, the jīva operates through a triad of instruments: the **body**, the **mind**, and the **ego**. These are not who the jīva truly is, but they are the mediums through which the jīva perceives, thinks, reacts, and believes itself to be a separate being.

- **The body** is the physical structure—visible, tangible, and subject to change and decay. It serves as the vehicle for sensory experience and outward action. From the illusion’s perspective, it is what anchors the *jīva* in space and time.
- **The mind** is the inner field of thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. It interprets sensory input, entertains desires, and responds to experience. It is subtle, invisible, and in constant motion—never at rest.
- **The ego** is the sense of “I”—the false identity that claims ownership of the body and mind. It is the assertion “I am this” or “this is mine,” giving rise to the experience of individuality. It is this ego that sustains the illusion that the *jīva* is a separate, limited self.

Together, this triad forms the apparatus through which the *jīva* engages with the world of appearance. Though none of these elements are ultimately real, their combined activity shapes the *jīva*’s apparent life within *Māyā*. In Advaita Vedānta, understanding this triad is essential, not because it is the truth, but because recognizing its illusory nature opens the possibility of freedom.

9 Memory as a function of the mind

Within the human body–mind–ego complex, memory plays a subtle but powerful role. In Advaita Vedānta, memory is not viewed as a mechanical record of brain activity, but as a living function of the mind itself. This function is traditionally referred to as *citta* (*CHIT-tuh*)—the faculty through which past experiences are retained, recalled, and re-presented to awareness. Memory allows the *jīva* to perceive continuity across time: to recognize faces, anticipate consequences, and form a sense of personal history. It is what gives familiarity to the present by silently referencing the past.

Memory is not a separate substance, but one of the natural movements of the mind, which constantly receives, interprets, stores, and replays experiences. Some memories arise clearly in thought; others remain dormant yet influence behavior and mood in subtle ways. Though these patterns seem to belong to the *jīva*, they are part of the illusion created by *Māyā* (*MAH-yah*). The *jīva*, under the spell of *avidyā* (*uh-VID-yah*), identifies with these memories and takes their contents to be its own story. In truth, however, the ever-changing stream of memory is no more the self than the flickering images on a screen are the screen itself.

10 Manas, Buddhi, and Ahaṁkāra: The inner faculties of the mind

In Advaita Vedānta, the mind is not a single entity, but a field of activity composed of distinct functions. These functions operate as part of the subtle body and serve as the primary

interface between the *jīva* and the world of experience. Among these, three major faculties are traditionally distinguished: *manas* (*MAH-nus*), *buddhi* (*BOOD-dhee*), and *ahaṁkāra* (*uh-HUM-kaa-rah*). Together, they make up the active structure through which the *jīva* perceives, evaluates, and responds—all within the realm projected by *Māyā* (*MAH-yah*).

- **Manas** is the lower or sensory mind. It receives inputs from the senses, entertains possibilities, reacts emotionally, and expresses uncertainty or indecision. It is the part of the mind that hesitates, considers, and oscillates between options.
- **Buddhi** is the higher intellect—the faculty of discrimination, judgment, and decision. It analyzes, determines, and resolves. While *manas* might ask, “Should I do this?” *buddhi* is the one that answers “Yes” or “No.”
- **Ahaṁkāra** is the ego-sense—the principle of individuation. It is the aspect of mind that claims, “I am the one thinking,” or “This is my action.” It creates the illusion of personal agency and separation by identifying the *jīva* with thoughts, roles, possessions, and experiences.

These faculties work together so seamlessly that the *jīva*, under the influence of *avidyā* (*uh-VID-yah*), mistakes their activity for its own identity. The result is the deeply rooted belief that “I am the thinker, the chooser, the doer.” Yet in truth, the real self—the *Ātman*—is untouched by these mental fluctuations, just as the sun remains unchanged by the movement of clouds across the sky.

11 Habitual behavior and the patterning of the *Jīva*

In Advaita Vedānta, habitual behavior is understood as a natural consequence of the *jīva*’s repeated identification with experiences within the field of illusion. Each time the *jīva* perceives, reacts, or desires, a subtle trace of that experience is retained in memory. Though these traces are not yet discussed here in full, they gradually shape the *jīva*’s tendencies, creating recognizable patterns of behavior. When the same responses are repeated again and again, they come to feel natural or automatic—even though they arise entirely within the mind under the influence of *Māyā* (*MAH-yah*) and *avidyā* (*uh-VID-yah*).

These patterns are not part of the *jīva*’s true nature, which is identical with *Brahman*, but they are so frequently repeated that the *jīva* mistakes them for its own identity. A person may say, “I am an angry person,” or “I am always anxious,” when in fact what is present is simply a repeated response—a movement of mind, remembered and replayed. These tendencies can become deeply ingrained, influencing perception, choice, and reaction, even in new situations. Though not ultimately real, habitual behavior plays a powerful role in maintaining the illusion of a personal self with a stable personality and history.

Understanding habitual behavior in this framework helps illuminate how the *jīva* becomes bound to a cycle of reaction and repetition. These patterns are not imposed from outside, nor

are they the product of fate, but arise from the *jīva*’s own repeated activity under the spell of ignorance. They can begin to weaken only when they are seen for what they are—impersonal tendencies arising in the mind, not defining truths about the self.

12 Observing and weakening habitual patterns

Although habitual patterns arise within the illusion of individuality, Advaita Vedānta holds that they can be observed, recognized, and gradually weakened. The key is not forceful suppression, but gentle and persistent attention. When a behavior or reaction repeats often enough, it begins to run on its own, unnoticed and unquestioned. But the *jīva*, even while under the influence of *avidyā* (*uh-VID-yah*), retains the capacity to witness the movements of the body, mind, and ego.

By cultivating the simple act of observation—watching a thought arise, a feeling intensify, or an impulse begin to form—the *jīva* creates space between stimulus and response. In that space, the automatic pattern may be seen not as a defining truth but as a tendency—a movement of the mind, shaped by past repetition. This recognition does not immediately dissolve the habit, but it begins to loosen its hold. A response that was once instantaneous becomes delayed, then questioned, and eventually released.

Over time, as the *jīva* observes these patterns without clinging to or resisting them, they lose the power to define or compel. The illusion of “I am this way” begins to erode. Though the *jīva* may still act, feel, or react, it no longer takes those movements to be its essence. In this way, habitual patterns—though unreal in the highest sense—can be softened within the illusion, reducing the *jīva*’s bondage to mechanical identity and preparing the ground for deeper clarity.

13 Īśvara: the lord within appearance

While Brahman is the ultimate, undivided reality in Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara acknowledges a provisional, empirical level of reality (*vyāvahārika satya*) within which a personal Lord, or *Īśvara* (*EESH-va-rah*), operates. *Īśvara* is Brahman reflected through the limiting adjunct (*upādhi*) of *māyā*. Unlike the individual *jīva*, whose knowledge is veiled by ignorance, *Īśvara* is associated with *māyā* in full control—not deluded by it, but using it to govern the universe in accordance with law and order.

In this role, *Īśvara* is the intelligent cause and regulator of the apparent world. *Īśvara* creates, sustains, and dissolves the cosmos, and administers the law of karma—ensuring that the fruits of actions (*karmaphala*) are delivered justly across lives. Though ultimately non-separate from Brahman, *Īśvara* is provisionally real as the divine person, the Lord to whom devotees may pray, surrender, and seek guidance. In devotional practice, *Īśvara* is often identified with various deities—Viṣṇu, Śiva, Durgā, or others—all seen as expressions

of the one Lord.

For Śaṅkara, Īśvara is not a fiction, but a necessary concept at the empirical level. Without Īśvara, karma would lack coherence, and spiritual practice would lack orientation. However, at the highest level (*pāramārthika satya*), even Īśvara is a manifestation within māyā. From the standpoint of non-duality, there is no second—no world, no soul, no god apart from Brahman. Yet until realization dawns, the jīva rightly relates to Īśvara as the moral and spiritual governor of the universe.

Thus, Īśvara serves a pivotal role: as the bridge between ignorance and truth, as the benevolent Lord who upholds dharma and guides the soul toward liberation. But like all provisional distinctions, even this must ultimately be relinquished. When the jīva awakens, the worshipped and the worshipper dissolve into the same essence. There is no “other.” Only Brahman remains.

14 Action and impression

In the Advaita Vedānta view, every action performed by the jīva—whether physical, verbal, or mental—leaves behind a subtle imprint within the mind. This imprint, though not tangible, becomes a seed that influences future thought and behavior. Over time, these impressions accumulate, forming the tendencies and inclinations that shape the jīva’s character and apparent destiny.

An action is never isolated. Even the smallest movement of thought or intention leaves behind a trace, just as a hand passing through water disturbs its surface. These impressions reinforce existing patterns or initiate new ones, deepening the illusion of individuality and continuity. The jīva acts as though it were an independent agent, and through repetition, this assumed role begins to feel natural, even necessary.

The impression left by each act is not stored in a physical place, but rather as a subtle tendency—a direction of inclination. These tendencies are what make certain reactions arise quickly and repeatedly, even when the original situation has long passed. For example, a past insult, once responded to with anger, may condition the jīva to react with defensiveness in future unrelated situations. In this way, the past continues to echo within the present, guiding future action without conscious awareness.

This dynamic of action and impression creates a kind of momentum within the illusion. Though the jīva is, in truth, Brahman—unchanging, indivisible, and ever free—it appears to be a bounded self navigating the world, conditioned by the very actions it has performed under the influence of ignorance. The illusion is deepened not by external force, but by the internal echo of the jīva’s own past movement. In this sense, the jīva weaves its own path through illusion, unaware that the thread was always drawn from within.

15 Karma: the law of action and its consequences

Having seen how every action leaves behind an impression within the mind, Advaita Vedānta identifies a deeper law that governs the continuity of these impressions: this is the principle of *karma* (*KAR-muh*). The word *karma* simply means “action,” but in philosophical usage, it refers to the natural law of cause and effect that operates within the illusory realm of *Māyā* (*MAH-yah*). Karma is not a divine punishment or reward system, nor does it involve any external judge. It is an impersonal and automatic principle: every action inevitably produces a consequence, and those consequences bind the *jīva* more deeply into the world of appearance. Within the empirical realm, karma is administered by Īśvara, the personal Lord who ensures that every action meets its appropriate result.

When a *jīva* acts under the influence of ignorance (*avidyā—uh-VID-yah*), it identifies itself with the body, mind, and ego, believing it to be the true self. Acting from this mistaken identity, the *jīva* accumulates the consequences of its choices. These consequences—rooted in past impressions and desires—determine the *jīva*’s tendencies, environment, and future experiences. Some results may be experienced immediately, while others lie dormant until conditions are ripe, manifesting as future circumstances.

In this way, karma sustains the illusion of continuity—the appearance of a personal self passing through time, shaped by a unique history and unfolding fate. Though ultimately unreal from the standpoint of Brahman, karma functions as a coherent law within the illusion. It creates the appearance of moral order, linking thought, word, and deed with consequence. The *jīva*, unaware of its true nature, thus becomes the author of its own bondage.

Karma does not operate merely at the level of gross physical acts. Even subtle thoughts, intentions, and unspoken motives carry weight. A thought of hatred, even if unexpressed, leaves its imprint and contributes to the inner structure of the *jīva*’s experience. Thus, karma is not restricted to visible outcomes but includes the internal shaping of character and perception.

As long as the *jīva* believes “I am the doer,” it continues to generate karma. This sense of authorship reinforces the illusion of separateness and binds the *jīva* to the wheel of action and reaction. From the perspective of Advaita Vedānta, the goal is not to accumulate good karma in the hope of a better future, but to recognize the underlying falsehood of agency itself. Only when the *jīva* ceases to identify with the actor and sees itself as ever-free Brahman does the binding force of karma dissolve.

16 Dharma: Ethics at the Level of Appearance

While Advaita Vedānta declares that the world is ultimately mithyā—neither fully real nor utterly unreal—it does not license moral indifference. At the empirical level of vyāvahāra, where the body, mind, society, and duty appear to function, ethical action remains indispensable.

Dharma (moral responsibility) is upheld not because the world is absolutely real, but because for the unenlightened *jīva*, it appears real—and within that appearance, action has consequences. Just as hunger and pain feel real to the body, so too does the suffering of others. Therefore, compassion, truthfulness, non-violence, and self-restraint are not optional virtues; they are vital steps in purifying the mind and preparing it for liberation.

Śaṅkara emphasizes that even a sincere aspirant must observe their duties in accordance with their role in life (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*). These ethical responsibilities are not contradicted by non-duality—they are expressions of inner discipline and selflessness, which loosen the ego's grip.

Once realization dawns and the Self is known to be non-dual, action continues outwardly but without personal ownership. The realized one may still act, but no longer from desire, fear, or ego; their actions flow from clarity and compassion, not compulsion. The Gītā's teaching applies: "*Do your duty without attachment to results.*"

Thus, morality in Advaita is not discarded but transcended—not by neglecting ethics, but by going beyond the sense of "I am the doer." Until that point, ethics is not optional. It is purification, preparation, and participation in the unfolding of truth within illusion.

17 Saṃsāra: The cycle of rebirth and apparent bondage

In Advaita Vedānta, the term *saṃsāra* (*SOM-saa-rah*) refers to the apparent cycle of birth, death, and rebirth—the continuous turning of embodied existence within the realm of illusion (*Māyā*). From the standpoint of ignorance (*avidyā*), the *jīva* appears to traverse from one lifetime to another, experiencing pleasure and pain, gain and loss, attachment and aversion—always seeking fulfillment, but never finding lasting peace.

This cycle is not real in the absolute sense; it belongs to the domain of relative reality (*vyāvahārika*), sustained by ignorance and misidentification. The *jīva*, forgetting its true identity as Brahman, becomes entangled in action (*karma*), which generates consequences that must be experienced. These consequences do not merely shape external events, but leave impressions on the subtle level of the *jīva*'s apparent mind—forming latent tendencies that influence future behavior and choices.

Saṃsāra thus arises from a combination of ignorance, desire, action, and residual impression. It is not imposed from outside, nor is it willed by a separate deity; it unfolds automatically through the laws of cause and effect within *Māyā*. Just as a dream continues until the sleeper awakens, saṃsāra continues until the *jīva* awakens to its true nature.

Importantly, saṃsāra is not regarded as eternal. It has a beginning—in the arising of ignorance—and it has an end—in the realization of truth. Liberation (*mokṣa*) is the cessation of this apparent cycle, not through suppression or escape, but through knowledge. When the mistaken identification with body, mind, and ego is dissolved, the *jīva* is no longer seen as bound, and saṃsāra is understood to be nothing more than a projection upon the

Self.

In this way, *saṃsāra* is not a punishment or a prison, but a mirror of ignorance—a vast display of mistaken identity. To transcend it is not to go somewhere else, but to see clearly what was always true: that there is no birth, no death, no rebirth—only Brahman, appearing as many, but ever one.

18 Saṃskāra: impressions that bind

In the framework of Advaita Vedānta, actions do not simply vanish after they are performed. Every experience, emotion, or intentional act leaves a subtle trace upon the inner instrument of the mind. These traces are called *saṃskāras* (*sums-KĀ-rahz*)—mental impressions or subliminal residues—and they form the basis of the *jīva*’s conditioning.

A *saṃskāra* is not merely a memory or an idea; it is a **deep psychological groove** formed by past actions, storing the *potential* for similar thoughts, emotions, or behaviors to arise again. Each time an action is repeated, the impression grows deeper, becoming more automatic, more reflexive. Over time, these impressions **accumulate into patterns**, shaping how the *jīva* reacts to the world and what it finds desirable or repulsive.

Saṃskāras are **inert** by themselves. They lie dormant within the unconscious field of the mind until they are **activated**—either by external stimuli, internal desire (*vāsanā*), or identification through ego (*ahaṃkāra*). Once triggered, they can compel the *jīva* to act in ways it may not fully understand, contributing to **habitual behavior** and **perpetuating the illusion of individuality and separateness**.

These impressions are not limited to a single lifetime. According to Advaita Vedānta, it is not *saṃskāra* alone, but the *residual karma* (*karma-śeṣa*) and latent desires (*vāsanā*) stored within the *causal body* (*kāraṇa-śarīra*) that carry over across births. Still, *saṃskāras* play a key role in this process, as they shape the *vāsanās* that direct future tendencies. Together, they form the *psychic continuity* that binds the apparent *jīva* to *saṃsāra*—the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. These accumulated tendencies help determine the *jīva*’s inclinations, circumstances, and level of spiritual maturity in its next incarnation.

In this way, **karma leaves its mark as *saṃskāra***, which then predisposes future karma, creating a cycle of action, impression, and repetition. The path to liberation requires the dissolution of these impressions—not through suppression, but through recognition, detachment, and the realization that they never belonged to the true Self.

19 Ahaṃkāra: ego, the false sense of doership

In Advaita Vedānta, the ego is referred to as *ahaṃkāra* (*uh-HUM-kaa-rah*), from the Sanskrit roots *aham* (“I”) and *kāra* (“maker” or “doer”). It is the mental construct that arises when

the *jīva*, under the influence of ignorance (*avidyā*), identifies itself with the body, mind, or personality. The ego is not the true self, but rather a reflection that mistakenly believes: “I am this body,” “I am this mind,” “I am the one who acts,” or “I am the one who suffers.”

Ahaṁkāra serves as the apparent center of experience within the illusion of individuality. It appropriates all perceptions, thoughts, and actions as belonging to itself. When the body feels pain, the ego says “I hurt.” When a thought arises, it says “I think.” When the body acts, it declares “I did this.” In doing so, it reinforces the idea of separation from others and from *Brahman*. Every statement of “I” made by the ego is rooted in misidentification.

The ego is not the true self, nor is it an ultimate substance, but within the illusion projected by *Māyā*, it is provisionally real. As Śaṅkara describes in texts like *Tattva Bodha*, *ahaṁkāra* is one of the functional evolutes of *Māyā*—a necessary component of empirical experience. Though not ultimately real, it arises naturally in embodied beings as the sense of individual agency and doership, and it persists until direct realization (*aparokṣānubhūti*) dissolves the illusion of separateness. It clings to memory, projects into the future, and compares the self to others. In its grasping and aversion, it creates narratives and demands—imagining itself to be at the center of a world that was never truly separate to begin with.

As the ego claims authorship of action, it becomes the false owner of the impressions (*saṁskāras*) that follow. These impressions accumulate and reinforce its apparent reality, creating a cycle of identification and bondage. Thus, the ego not only appropriates present experiences, but also carries forward the burden of past conditioning, binding the *jīva* more deeply to illusion.

Ahaṁkāra is not destroyed by force or denial, but by careful observation and discernment. As long as the *jīva* believes “I am the doer,” *karma* continues to bind, and the cycle of action and reaction persists. But when the ego is seen through—recognized as a false claimant to authorship and identity—its hold begins to loosen. What remains is pure awareness, unburdened by possession or story, free from the illusion of separation.

20 Mokṣa (Liberation): what it is, and how it is realized

In Advaita Vedānta, liberation is called *mokṣa* (*MOKE-sha*)—the final and complete freedom from the illusion of individuality, agency, and separation. It is not an event that occurs in time, nor is it something gained anew. Rather, it is the clear recognition of a truth that was always present: that the *jīva* was never truly separate from *Brahman*. Mokṣa is the removal of ignorance, not the attainment of something external.

As long as the *jīva* remains under the spell of *avidyā* (ignorance), it takes itself to be a limited entity—the doer of actions, the enjoyer of pleasures, and the sufferer of pains. It lives within the world of *māyā*, driven by desires (*vāsanā*), shaped by deep impressions (*saṁskāra*), and bound by the fruits of action. These impressions and desires arise from ignorance and perpetuate the illusion of separation and agency. But when the illusion of ego (*ahaṁkāra*) is seen through, and the false identification with body, mind, and individuality

is severed, what remains is pure, undivided awareness—Brahman itself. Even Īśvara, as the personal Lord, is a reflection of Brahman through māyā; thus, liberation dissolves not only the individual sense of self, but also the duality between jīva and Īśvara.

Liberation is not the destruction of the world, the death of the body, or the cessation of experience. It is the correction of a fundamental misapprehension. The liberated one (*jīvanmukta*—*JEE-vun-mook-tuh*) continues to live and act, but without attachment or delusion. They no longer identify with the mind or body, no longer claim ownership over action, and are untouched by sorrow or desire. They abide as pure awareness—full, complete, and free.

From the standpoint of absolute truth, there was never any bondage, never any journey, never any jīva. Brahman alone is. The appearance of separation, effort, and liberation belongs to the domain of māyā—a dream experienced by none. The scriptures often state: *na punar āvṛttiḥ*—“there is no return.” Once ignorance is dispelled, it cannot arise again, for it was never real to begin with.

Thus, mokṣa is not a reward for good deeds, nor the culmination of becoming. It is the simple, direct realization of what is: *Tat tvam asi* (“That Thou Art”)—the eternal truth that the self (*ātman*) is Brahman. There is nothing beyond this to attain, no higher state to reach. The seeker disappears, and in that disappearance, all that remains is reality—vast, silent, whole.

21 Means to liberation: the unfolding of clarity

Liberation (*mokṣa*) is not something earned or newly acquired—it is the recognition of what has always been true. Yet, for the *jīva* bound in illusion, certain preparatory steps are necessary to dissolve ignorance (*avidyā*) and allow the truth to shine forth. The path in Advaita Vedānta is not one of ritual or merit, but of direct insight born of clarity, dispassion, and contemplation. Four key disciplines, known together as the *sādhana-catustaya* (the fourfold qualifications), are emphasized as the means to this unfolding.

21.1 Viveka (*vi-VAY-ka*): discrimination between the real and the unreal

Viveka is the capacity to discern what is eternal from what is fleeting, what is the Self from what is not the Self. It is the subtle inner intelligence that recognizes that all objects of experience—body, senses, thoughts, emotions, possessions, even religious identity—are impermanent and changing. The true Self, being unchanging and self-luminous, cannot be any of these. *Viveka* initiates the turning inward, away from the play of *māyā*, and orients the seeker toward the reality of Brahman.

21.2 Vairāgya (*vai-RAA-gya*): dispassion toward the unreal

Where *viveka* sees, *vairāgya* lets go. It is the natural consequence of discrimination—a disinterest in transient pleasures and achievements, no longer seen as meaningful in the face of the eternal. This is not repression or ascetic denial, but a deep freedom from attachment. The seeker neither clings to joy nor recoils from sorrow. The world may be experienced, but it no longer captivates. This equanimity creates the inner space necessary for liberation to unfold.

21.3 Śamādi-ṣaṭka-sampatti (*sha-MAA-dee shut-ka sum-PAH-tee*): the sixfold inner virtues

This third discipline consists of cultivating six interrelated qualities of mind that support steady inquiry and dissolve distraction:

- **Śama:** Calmness or inner quietude; control over the mind’s wandering tendencies.
- **Dama:** Restraint of the senses; mastery over the organs of perception and action.
- **Uparati:** Withdrawal; a natural turning away from external rituals and duties that no longer serve the inner quest.
- **Titikṣā:** Forbearance; the capacity to endure hardship and suffering without complaint or agitation.
- **Śraddhā:** Faith; deep trust in the teacher, the scriptures, and the path itself.
- **Samādhāna:** Single-pointedness; the ability to fix the mind steadily on the Self.

These virtues are not enforced externally but ripen naturally when the first two limbs—discrimination and dispassion—have matured.

21.4 Mumukṣutva (*moo-mook-SHOOT-vuh*): the burning desire for liberation

The fourth and culminating qualification is the intense longing for liberation itself. Without this deep inner urge to be free from bondage and illusion, the other disciplines do not take root. *Mumukṣutva* is not a passive interest or theoretical curiosity; it is a consuming fire—a refusal to settle for half-measures, to remain bound by what is false. It turns knowledge into transformation and longing into realization.

21.5 Guru and scripture: revealed guides in the darkness

In Advaita Vedānta, the truth is not invented but uncovered. The role of the teacher (*guru*) and the scriptures (*śruti*) is not to impose a belief but to serve as a mirror—pointing to what is already present but veiled. A true teacher is not a creator of doctrine but a revealer of clarity. The *Upaniṣads*, as the culmination of the Vedas, provide the framework for this unfolding, but they must be brought to life in the presence of living insight. In the words of the tradition, “*Only he who has a teacher knows.*”

Together, these four disciplines prepare the mind like a polished mirror—reflecting the truth without distortion. They do not create the Self, for the Self was never absent. They dissolve the veils—of confusion, of clinging, of doubt, and of false identification—and leave behind what was always shining: pure, self-effulgent awareness.

22 The realization that I am Brahman

At the culmination of the path, the seeker comes to the direct and irreversible realization expressed in the great *Mahāvākya* (great saying):

Ahaṁ Brahmāsmi—“I am Brahman.”

This realization is not intellectual or emotional; it is an immediate, intuitive, and transformative recognition of one’s true nature. It is not that the *jīva* becomes Brahman—for it always was. Rather, the mistaken identification with body, mind, ego, and individuality falls away, and what remains is simple, undivided awareness.

Such clarity is not instantaneous. Advaita Vedānta emphasizes a threefold process by which this understanding is brought into being and stabilized:

- **Śravaṇa** (*SHRAH-vuh-nuh*): the attentive listening to the teachings of non-duality as revealed in the Upaniṣads and unfolded by a qualified teacher. This is not passive reception but an active, focused encounter with truth.
- **Manana** (*MUH-nuh-nuh*): the reflective process by which doubts, contradictions, and misunderstandings are examined and resolved. Here, reason sharpens insight and discards habitual assumptions.
- **Nididhyāsana** (*nih-dih-DHYA-sa-nuh*): deep, sustained meditation on the truth, where the knowledge gained from hearing and reflection is absorbed until it becomes firm and unwavering. This contemplation does not aim to attain something new, but to dissolve all lingering misidentification.

Through this threefold discipline, the teaching ceases to be merely conceptual. It ripens into direct recognition.

The realization dawns not as a mystical vision or dramatic revelation, but often as a quiet certainty—a seeing that needs no proof. Just as one awakens from a dream and knows it was never real, the one who knows Brahman sees that all separation, suffering, and striving were rooted in ignorance (*avidyā*) alone.

Nothing changes externally: the body may still perform actions, the mind may still produce thoughts, and the world may continue to appear. But within, the fundamental axis of identity has shifted. The individual no longer says “I am this” or “I possess that,” but simply abides as pure being—*sat*—untouched, unmoved, ever-present.

There is no longer any sense of gain or loss, of success or failure. The one who knows “I am Brahman” recognizes that there is no second thing—nothing apart from awareness itself. All names and forms (*nāma-rūpa*) are known to be appearances in consciousness, and consciousness alone is real.

The realized one does not necessarily abandon worldly life or cease to interact with others. Rather, they live as a silent witness, free from entanglement, motivated by compassion rather than compulsion. Though the senses may function and duties may be performed, the binding force of karma has dissolved, for the ego—the “doer”—is no longer taken as real.

This is not the attainment of a higher state, but the shedding of all false identities. It is the recognition that there was never bondage, and therefore no need for freedom. The river realizes it was always the ocean.

Tat tvam asi—“That Thou Art.”

This is the final truth of Advaita: that the self is not other than the whole, that the light within is not separate from the sun. There is no higher realization, no further step. The journey ends in the stillness of what has always been—pure, whole, undivided.

23 The illusion falls away and the *jīva* is known never to have existed apart

With the realization that “I am Brahman,” the final veil of illusion—the belief in a separate, individual self—dissolves completely. The *jīva* (*JEE-vuh*), once thought to be a distinct soul undergoing birth and death, is seen to have never existed independently. It was a case of mistaken identity: the limitless was mistaken for the limited, the eternal for the ephemeral, the real for the apparent.

In truth, there was never an entity that was bound, nor one that became free. The entire journey—from ignorance to knowledge, from bondage to liberation—was a movement within illusion. From the standpoint of *Māyā* (*MAH-yah*), it seemed that there were many selves striving for truth. From the standpoint of Brahman, there was never any division to begin with. Just as a rope may be mistaken for a snake in dim light, the self was mistaken for a *jīva* in the dimness of ignorance.

When this illusion falls away, what remains is unshakable peace—not the peace that comes and goes, but the peace that underlies all experience. The knower of Brahman sees all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings, not as a poetic metaphor, but as direct insight. There is no longer any sense of “mine” or “yours,” “this” or “that.” All distinctions collapse into the single, seamless reality that alone is.

Even the notion of “realization” is ultimately let go. No one realizes Brahman, for there is no one apart from it to do so. Brahman alone is—ever free, ever full, ever present. The waves subside, and the ocean remains—vast, silent, unmoved.

Thus, the *jīva* was never a separate entity traveling through space and time. It was Brahman all along, appearing as if bound, only to awaken to its own nature. There is no becoming what one is; there is only the cessation of the belief that one was ever anything else.

24 Not two: the end of the journey that never was

In the end, there is no end. The journey that seemed to stretch across countless births—shaped by desire, ignorance, karma, and *saṃskāra*—was never truly undertaken. When the illusion lifts, it is seen that there was no traveler, no path, and no destination. All such distinctions were appearances within the play of *Māyā*, projected upon the one, undivided reality.

The core of this teaching is *Advaita* (*uhd-VAI-tuh*)—“not two.” But why “two”? Because duality is the first illusion. The sense of “I” and “you,” subject and object, seer and seen, self and other, knower and known—these pairs give rise to all further divisions: of body and mind, world and God, good and evil, bondage and liberation. From the first mistaken assumption that there exists something other than the Self arises the entire cascade of misapprehension.

To say “not two” is not merely to assert oneness—it is to deny the very root of illusion: the assumption that there ever was a second thing. This negation is not conceptual; it is direct recognition. In the moment of realization, all dualities collapse. There is no longer a gap between experience and experienter, between Brahman and self. What remains is Being—self-luminous, indivisible, and free.

The self that once imagined itself to be bound is discovered to have always been free. The *jīva*, with its aspirations, fears, and sense of agency, was never apart from the infinite. The dream of separation dissolves—not because the world disappears, but because it is no longer taken as separate.

All teachings, practices, scriptures, and disciplines are like ladders that vanish once the roof is reached. The guru’s words, philosophical reasoning, and meditative insight all serve only to undo the false belief in duality. Even the notion of realization itself is part of the illusion. Brahman does not awaken—Brahman is that in which awakening appears to occur.

In this view, even the structure of this exposition—its steps, arguments, and unfolding—dissolves into silence. What can be said about that which is beyond thought, beyond form,

beyond difference? Only this: *Tat tvam asi*—“That Thou Art.” You always were, always are, and always will be—never divided, never other.

There is no two. There never was. The journey was a dream in consciousness, and its end is not a conclusion, but a waking up—not to something new, but to what has always been.

25 Śaṅkara’s interpretive method for resolving contradiction and revealing non-duality

The brilliance of Ādi Śaṅkara’s contribution to Indian philosophy lies not only in the doctrines he expounded, but in the interpretive method he employed to derive them. Faced with a vast and ancient scriptural tradition—composed of hymns, rituals, philosophies, and meditative insights accumulated over centuries—Śaṅkara did not discard earlier material, nor did he claim to receive new revelation. Rather, he articulated a coherent, non-dual philosophy by interpreting the existing Vedic and Upaniṣadic texts through a disciplined hermeneutic approach (a careful and consistent method of interpretation, aiming to uncover their deepest meaning rather than taking every verse at face value).

The Vedas and their appendices—including the Upaniṣads—are not a singular, uniform voice. They contain devotional hymns, ritual prescriptions, mythic narratives, speculative dialogues, and bold declarations of metaphysical unity. Śaṅkara accepted this diversity, but he maintained that not all parts of the Vedas speak at the same level of truth. His method prioritized what he called the *jñāna-kāṇḍa*—the knowledge portion of the Vedas (primarily the Upaniṣads)—over the *karmakāṇḍa*—the ritual portion.

Where contradiction appeared, Śaṅkara did not attempt to harmonize all perspectives. Instead, he asserted a principle of hierarchical truth: ritual actions, deities, and dualistic philosophies belonged to the realm of provisional or lower truth (*vyāvahārika-satya*—empirical or transactional reality), whereas the direct realization of Brahman—beyond all dualities—belonged to the highest truth (*pāramārthika-satya*—ultimate reality). Apparent contradictions were resolved by recognizing this layered structure of meaning. A ritual hymn might be meaningful within the world of name and form (*nāma-rūpa*), but would be transcended in the vision of non-duality.

Śaṅkara also employed a method known as *adhyāropa-apavāda*—superimposition and negation. First, a provisional explanation or metaphor is offered to guide the seeker (e.g., the world as created by God); then, that view is withdrawn, or negated, once it has served its pedagogical purpose. This method mirrors the process of spiritual inquiry itself: starting from ordinary assumptions and gradually dissolving them through reason and contemplation until only the non-dual truth remains.

Additionally, Śaṅkara drew heavily upon the Mahāvākyas—the “great sayings” of the Upaniṣads such as:

- *Tat tvam asi*—“That Thou Art” (Chāndogya Upaniṣad)

- *Aham brahmāsmi*—“I am Brahman” (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad)
- *Prajñānam brahma*—“Consciousness is Brahman” (Aitareya Upaniṣad)
- *Ayam ātmā brahma*—“This Self is Brahman” (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad)

He treated these as the central pillars of the Upaniṣadic message—not isolated declarations, but revelations of the highest truth to be realized through disciplined reflection and inquiry. Texts that seemed to imply difference, plurality, or ritual obligation were interpreted in light of these non-dual insights—not discarded, but sublated.

Thus, Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta was not a patchwork of doctrines, nor a break from tradition. It was a reorientation—a refinement of interpretive priorities that elevated the inner vision of the Upaniṣads, dissolving ritual formalism into the silent recognition of the Self as Brahman. His legacy rests not merely in the truth he taught, but in how he revealed that truth to be already present—hidden in plain sight within the ancient words of the ṛṣis.

26 Reinterpreting the terms: how Śaṅkara changed the meaning of key concepts

One of the most profound aspects of Ādi Śaṅkara’s contribution was not only his overarching vision of non-duality, but also the way he reinterpreted foundational terms from the Vedas and Upaniṣads. These reinterpretations were not merely semantic; they fundamentally shifted how key ideas were understood, practiced, and internalized within Hindu philosophy. Many terms that had long-standing ritualistic, mythological, or cosmological meanings were transformed into philosophical and psychological categories. Below, we explore several examples of this re-reading:

Brahman

Earlier meaning: In the early Vedic context, *Brahman* referred to the sacred power inherent in ritual utterance, prayer, or mantra. It was closely associated with speech (*vāc*) and the priestly force that activated the cosmos through sacrifice.

Śaṅkara’s reinterpretation: Śaṅkara universalized *Brahman* into the absolute, non-dual, infinite reality—the substratum of all that appears. No longer tied to ritual efficacy or speech, *Brahman* became pure consciousness itself: unchanging, partless, and all-encompassing.

Ātman and Jīva

Earlier meaning: *Ātman* and *jīva* were often used interchangeably, both referring to the “soul” or “life-breath” that animated beings. In many early texts, these terms simply denoted

the individual person or inner self without strict metaphysical distinctions.

Śaṅkara's reinterpretation: Śaṅkara made a sharp distinction between the two. *Ātman* is the unconditioned, universal Self—identical with *Brahman*. *Jīva*, by contrast, is the illusory self, the individual under the spell of *māyā* and *avidyā*, mistakenly identifying with body and mind.

Māyā

Earlier meaning: In earlier Vedic and epic texts, *māyā* referred to magical power, illusion, deception, or hiddenness—often wielded by gods or asuras to conceal or manipulate.

Śaṅkara's reinterpretation: Śaṅkara elevated *māyā* to a cosmic principle: the power that makes the One appear as many. It is not merely illusion in the sense of deception, but the very mechanism by which the undivided reality appears as the world of duality, difference, and change.

Karma

Earlier meaning: *Karma* originally referred to ritual action—especially the performance of prescribed Vedic sacrifices and duties (*karma-kāṇḍa*).

Śaṅkara's reinterpretation: While acknowledging the role of ritual in early stages of life, Śaṅkara held that action performed with desire for results reinforces the illusion of doership and prolongs bondage. Liberation requires transcending *karma* through knowledge, not accumulating merit through action.

Non-attached action: However, Śaṅkara distinguishes this from *karma-yoga*—selfless action performed without attachment to outcomes. In his *Gītā* commentary, he affirms this path as a preparatory discipline that purifies the mind and prepares the seeker for knowledge (*jñāna*). Thus, action remains valid at the empirical level (*vyāvahārika*) when guided by non-attachment and inner renunciation.

Mokṣa

Earlier meaning: Liberation (*mokṣa*) in some traditions was seen as ascending to a heavenly realm, escaping rebirth, or union with a personal deity.

Śaṅkara's reinterpretation: For Śaṅkara, *mokṣa* is not going anywhere; it is the realization that one was never bound to begin with. It is the direct knowledge that one's true nature (*ātman*) is *Brahman*, beyond time, space, and causality.

Guru

Earlier meaning: A teacher or master who often conveyed ritual knowledge or sacred texts.

Śaṅkara's reinterpretation: The guru became indispensable for removing ignorance, not by conveying ritual techniques, but by leading the seeker to recognize their true nature as Brahman. The guru's function was epistemic and philosophical, not priestly or sacramental.

These reinterpretations allowed Śaṅkara to recast the spiritual path in purely philosophical and introspective terms, placing the locus of truth not in external rites or divine intervention, but in the inner realization of unity. In doing so, he profoundly reshaped the Hindu worldview for generations to come.

27 The singular contribution of Ādi Śaṅkara and what followed

In the vast and evolving tradition of Hindu thought, the contribution of Ādi Śaṅkara stands as a singular turning point—a profound synthesis and clarification that re-centered the metaphysical compass toward non-dual insight. At a time when the landscape of Indian philosophy was marked by theological contention, ritualism, and caste rigidity, Śaṅkara offered a vision that was at once radical and deeply rooted in the Upaniṣads: that there is, in truth, no separation—*advaita*—“not two.”

To grasp the depth of this assertion, one must understand what “two” refers to. Dualism (*dvaita*) is the view that there exists a fundamental split between self and other, between subject and object, between the divine and the world. This view, common to most religious and philosophical traditions, sustains the belief in a journey from imperfection toward perfection, from an individual soul toward an external, supreme God.

Śaṅkara challenged this premise at its root. In his view, all such distinctions are the result of ignorance (*avidyā*) and belong only to the plane of illusion (*māyā*). There is no actual separation between seer and seen, knower and known. There is only Brahman—pure, infinite, indivisible—and the sense of individuality, effort, and striving is part of the mistaken appearance of “two.” Even the soul that seeks liberation is already free, already one with the absolute. The only barrier is misidentification.

Śaṅkara reduced the entire metaphysical structure to:

1. One reality: Brahman (non-dual, attributeless, infinite).
2. One problem: Avidyā (ignorance), manifesting through Māyā (illusion).
3. One solution: Direct knowledge of the Self as Brahman.

This provides a minimalist metaphysics with remarkable internal consistency. Once you

accept the non-duality of being and the illusoriness of differentiation, everything else unfolds logically. There is no need to explain God's partiality, soul's differences, or moral diversity in terms of divine will or fate—they are all apparent, not real.

Śaṅkara's contribution was not limited to abstract metaphysics. Through his commentaries on the *Brahma Sūtras*, the Upaniṣads, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, his logical rebuttals of both ritualist orthodoxy and nihilistic heterodoxy, and his establishment of monastic institutions devoted to contemplation and self-inquiry, Śaṅkara transformed Hindu spiritual life. He revitalized the authority of the Vedas not through liturgy, but through the direct realization of truth—a truth that lies beyond caste, form, or temple, and is accessible to all.

Yet, the disruptive clarity of Śaṅkara's vision—that the self is Brahman, and that all distinctions are ultimately illusory—provoked a variety of responses in the centuries that followed. Alternative schools arose that sought to soften, reinterpret, or reframe his conclusions. Systems such as Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualism) and Dvaita (dualism) reasserted a firm ontological distinction between the soul and God, creator and creation. These views gained popularity in part because they affirmed and sacralized traditional devotional practices: personal deities, temple rituals, and caste-based duties. While Śaṅkara himself did not reject temple worship—indeed, he composed hymns and established monastic centers near major shrines—he regarded such practices as provisional means, not ends. For Advaita, temples and rituals could serve as aids to inner purification, but the ultimate goal remained direct knowledge of the Self.

The emerging theistic schools, by contrast, increasingly made temple-centered devotion not just preparatory but soteriologically essential. Salvation was now conditioned on ritual observance, scriptural adherence, and caste-based eligibility, all mediated through priestly institutions. Though temples had long played a central role in South Indian religious life—including during Śaṅkara's time—their role shifted: from supporting inner realization to becoming definitive loci of grace and divine presence. In contrast to Śaṅkara's emphasis on inward illumination and non-dual insight, these later traditions re-inscribed social and metaphysical distinctions, placing renewed weight on the authority of scripture, ritual purity, and divine otherness.

Śaṅkara himself accepted the value of ritual and devotion within a graded path. He composed devotional hymns, upheld the karmic duties of householders, and acknowledged the utility of temple worship—but always as preparatory, not ultimate. His emphasis lay in transcending ritual through discernment (*viveka*) and realization. The guru in Advaita is not a priest who intercedes or dispenses merit, but a teacher who removes ignorance. Whereas priests operate within the domain of *karma* and *māyā*, the guru points beyond all dualities—beyond even the categories of worshipper and worshipped. The teacher does not stand between the seeker and truth, but reveals that no such separation ever truly existed.

More critically, these reinterpretations often re-inscribed the caste system into their metaphysics in a more overt and prescriptive way. Śaṅkara himself did not reject the traditional varṇa-āśrama framework; he upheld it as part of the relative order of life necessary for social harmony and spiritual progression. However, Advaita Vedānta subtly undercut its ultimate validity: by asserting that the true self (*ātman*) is identical with Brahman, and that all

distinctions are products of ignorance (*avidyā*), caste becomes, at the highest level, illusory. In Śaṅkara's vision, the same light of awareness shines in all beings, regardless of social status. By contrast, many later traditions not only preserved caste roles but sacralized them, embedding hierarchy more deeply into theological structures. The beauty and symmetry of Advaita—where all forms are appearances in the one non-dual reality—gave way to systems that re-legitimated social stratification as reflections of divine order. While caste never disappeared in practice, Advaita provided a philosophical space where its ultimate significance was denied—a space that narrowed again under the revival of dualistic orthodoxy.

Thus, Śaṅkara's teaching remains both a high watermark and a constant challenge. It invites the seeker to look past inherited dogmas and social roles, past form and ritual, and directly into the nature of the self—which, when seen clearly, is not other than the absolute. For some, this is too much: too stark, too demanding, too disorienting. And yet for others, it is the only vision that truly liberates.

In Śaṅkara's words:

Brahma satyam jagan mithyā, jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ

“Brahman is real, the world is illusory; the self is none other than Brahman.”

“Not two”—not even one and another—only This.

28 Historical and Philosophical Context

Advaita Vedānta, as crystallized by Ādi Śaṅkara (*AH-dee SHUN-ka-rah*) in the early medieval period, emerged not in isolation but in active dialogue and debate with numerous other philosophical systems. Śaṅkara's formulation of non-duality was both a synthesis of the Upaniṣadic vision and a rigorous response to competing metaphysical and epistemological claims prevalent in his time.

Among his principal interlocutors were the dualist and ritualist schools of **Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā**³ (*POOR-vuh mee-MAAM-saa*), which grounded religious life in the authority of the Vedas and the performance of prescribed actions (*karma*—*KAR-mah*). Śaṅkara challenged this view by asserting that liberation (*mokṣa*—*MOAK-shuh*) cannot be the product of action, which is always finite and conditioned. Instead, he located freedom in knowledge alone—the direct realization of the self as *Brahman* (*BRUH-muhn*), which transcends action, ritual, and duality.

Equally significant were the Buddhist schools, particularly the **Yogācāra** (*yo-GAA-chaarah*, mind-only) and **Mādhyaṃika** (*maadh-YUH-mi-kah*, middle-way) traditions, whose

³An early Hindu school that teaches the Vedas are primarily manuals for precise sacrifice; by doing the rituals exactly as prescribed, one secures worldly prosperity and cosmic order. Śaṅkara challenges this view, arguing that liberation comes from knowing the Self, not from flawless ritual performance.

subtle analyses of consciousness, illusion, and causality had profoundly influenced Indian philosophy for centuries. Śaṅkara's writings, especially his commentaries and independent treatises, reveal a sustained engagement with these doctrines. He accepted the Buddhist critique of permanence and essence in conditioned phenomena but argued that the Buddhists had overcorrected by denying a stable, unchanging self or substratum.

In Śaṅkara's view, the Mādhyamika assertion of universal emptiness (*śūnyatā*—*SHOON-yuh-taa*) led to a conceptual void without ontological ground, while the Yogācāra tendency to collapse all experience into mind lacked a firm criterion for truth beyond appearance. In contrast, Advaita affirmed a positive, unchanging reality—*Brahman*—that underlies and illumines all appearances, without itself being an object.

Śaṅkara thus positioned Advaita as a middle way: rejecting both eternal multiplicity and radical emptiness, both external ritualism and internal subjectivism. His doctrine of **adhyāropa-apavāda** (*udh-YAA-roh-puh ah-puh-VAA-duh*, “superimposition and negation”) offered a method to provisionally accept phenomena for pedagogical purposes, only to negate them later in favor of the highest non-dual truth.

Śaṅkara's approach to scriptural interpretation is governed by strict hermeneutical rules. Where sacred texts conflict, śruti (revealed scripture, especially the Upaniṣads) takes precedence over smṛti (texts based on memory and tradition, such as epics or legal codes). Within śruti itself, he ranks the terse, declarative identity-statements known as mahāvākyas (e.g., “Tat tvam asi,” “Aham Brahmasmi”) above arthavāda—passages offering praise, metaphor, or secondary meaning. To reconcile apparent contradictions in the scriptures, Śaṅkara regularly invokes the method of lakṣaṇā (secondary implication), allowing the reader to intuit the intended non-literal meaning. This method protects the non-dual vision of the Upaniṣads from being diluted by myth, ritualism, or anthropomorphic theology.

By responding to these rival systems, Śaṅkara sharpened Advaita's arguments and clarified its boundaries. Understanding this intellectual context is essential for grasping the precision and force of his insights—not merely as mystical assertions, but as reasoned responses to the major philosophical currents of his day.

29 Modern practitioners of Advaita and its relation to later Hindu traditions

In the centuries following the life and work of Ādi Śaṅkara, Hinduism diversified further into numerous philosophical and devotional traditions. While many of these retained some influence from Śaṅkara's non-dualism, others moved toward more personalistic or theistic interpretations. Today, the spiritual landscape of Hinduism includes both those who remain faithful to Śaṅkara's radical monism and those who embrace dualistic or qualified non-dualistic systems centered on devotion to specific deities. This section explores three interrelated topics: the continued presence and practice of Advaita Vedānta in the modern world, how its adherents view the developments that followed, and how they themselves are

regarded by followers of later traditions.

29.1 Contemporary Adherents of Śaṅkara's Advait

While much of modern Hindu practice has been shaped by devotional movements centered on specific deities (such as Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, Śiva, or Durgā), the tradition of Advaita Vedānta, as revived and expounded by Ādi Śaṅkara, still maintains a living lineage. This lineage persists primarily through the monastic institutions (maṭhas) established by Śaṅkara, as well as through renunciant orders (sannyāsins) and lay practitioners devoted to philosophical inquiry and non-dual realization.

These adherents typically eschew elaborate ritual and temple worship, focusing instead on study of the Upaniṣads, the Brahma Sūtras, and Śaṅkara's commentaries, as well as engagement in meditation, discrimination (*viveka*), and inner detachment (*vairāgya*). Guidance is sought from realized teachers (*gurus*), but not in the sense of intercessory priests. Unlike temple priests who perform rituals on behalf of others, gurus in the Advaita tradition serve as teachers of wisdom and facilitators of self-realization, emphasizing that liberation is internal and does not require external acts of devotion.

While exact figures are difficult to obtain, conservative estimates suggest that dedicated followers of traditional Advaita Vedānta number in the low millions, primarily across South India and among monastic and philosophical communities. Including modern Vedānta-inspired spiritual seekers worldwide (such as those in the Ramakrishna and Chinmaya missions), this number may range from 2 to 10 million.

29.2 Advaita's View of Later Theistic Movements

From the standpoint of traditional Advaita Vedānta, later dualistic, qualified non-dualistic, and pluralistic theologies are seen as valid at the empirical level (*vyāvahāra*) but not as the highest truth (*pāramārthika*). They reflect the workings of *māyā*—the illusion of separation—and thus serve as provisional views that support the spiritual growth of many seekers. Far from dismissing them entirely, Advaita recognizes such theistic approaches as useful stages along the path.

Śaṅkara himself composed devotional hymns, including the famous *Bhaja Govindam*, and affirmed the purifying value of *bhakti* (devotion) when practiced without attachment. Devotion, for the Advaitin, can help quiet the mind, refine the emotions, and cultivate inwardness. However, ultimate liberation lies in the recognition that the worshiper and the worshiped are not-two—that all forms are appearances of the one reality, Brahman. Thus, while devotional theologies may emphasize difference, Advaita seeks to reveal the unity behind that appearance.

29.3 Dualistic Perceptions of Advaita Practitioners

Followers of dualistic and qualified non-dualistic schools (such as Dvaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita, or various Bhakti movements) often perceive Advaita Vedānta as overly abstract or philosophically austere. To those rooted in heartfelt devotion to a personal deity, the Advaitin emphasis on formlessness and identity with Brahman may seem distant or unrelatable. Some traditions explicitly reject non-duality, maintaining an eternal distinction between the soul and God, and viewing surrender and love as the primary means to liberation.

Nevertheless, many devotional traditions acknowledge Advaita's integrity as a path suited to those drawn to inquiry and inner detachment. Śaṅkara is often respected even by those who differ from his conclusions, both for his scholarship and for his devotional expressions. In popular discourse, Advaitins are sometimes viewed as philosophers or contemplatives, emphasizing direct self-knowledge over ritual or outward devotion. While this may seem at odds with temple-centered worship, it reflects a complementary emphasis rather than outright opposition.

29.4 Summary

Despite such divergences, all these paths are often held—even by their critics—to be within the broad fold of Sanātana Dharma, the eternal tradition. The tension between unity and plurality, non-duality and devotion, is not viewed as a failure, but as a reflection of the vast and accommodating scope of Hindu thought.

30 Contrasts with Secular Worldviews: Atheism, Materialism, Humanism, and Scientific Naturalism

To aid readers coming from religious backgrounds, each major section of this text will here be contrasted with one or more non-theistic worldviews. These include atheism (the denial or absence of belief in any god), materialism (the belief that only physical matter exists), humanism (the view that human welfare, reason, and ethics are central without needing supernatural justification), and scientific naturalism (the view that nature is all there is, and can be understood through empirical investigation and reason). In general, we will categorize these as a *secularist*.

This contrast is not intended as a refutation of any one worldview, nor as a comprehensive attack on Advaita. Rather, it is meant to illuminate the differences in foundational assumptions, methods of knowing, and visions of what it means to be a person or self.

While Advaita Vedānta rests on introspective insight into consciousness as the primary reality, secular worldviews often begin with the observable world and proceed by inference. Atheism, for example, answers only a single question—"Do you believe in God?"—and says

little else. Materialism offers an ontology—“Only physical matter exists”—but does not dictate ethics or meaning. Humanism provides an ethical framework—“Human dignity and flourishing matter”—but is open about metaphysics. Each, then, is a piece of a puzzle.

Throughout this section, the reader will find contrast sections that explore how a secular materialist might interpret concepts like karma, ego, liberation, or the self—not as illusions or metaphysical realities, but as psychological, social, or biological patterns. In doing so, we hope to provide both clarity and intellectual hospitality across traditions.

30.1 Brahman

For a secularist, ontological reality consists of the physical universe—matter, energy, space, and time—all governed by natural laws. This view holds that what we know to exist is what can be observed, measured, or reasonably inferred from empirical evidence. It does not claim with certainty that nothing else exists, but rather that anything beyond this realm lies outside the scope of current knowledge and should not be accepted as real without compelling evidence. The basic constituents of reality are particles, fields, and forces, as described by physics, and all phenomena, including life and consciousness, arise from these in complex but ultimately physical ways.

In this framework, consciousness is not a separate substance or immaterial essence. Instead, it is understood as an emergent property of the brain—a result of complex interactions among physical structures. The self is not seen as a permanent or independent entity, but rather as a transient pattern of neural activity that ceases with the death of the organism.

Because there is no belief in a deity or transcendent source of meaning, the universe is seen as without inherent purpose. The universe simply exists, without intention or design. This means that, morality, and value are understood as human constructs, shaped by biology, society, and culture: valuable, certainly, but not grounded in anything beyond collective human experience and cognition. They are real in the sense that they affect behavior and relationships, but they are not considered to have existence independent of human minds.

In sum, for the materialist atheist, ontological reality is limited to what can be grounded in the natural world. Everything else—including spiritual claims—is either unverified, unknowable, or treated with skepticism until demonstrated otherwise.

30.2 Māyā

From a secular standpoint, a sense is a biological process by which the nervous system detects specific types of physical input from the external or internal environment, converts that input into electrical signals (neural impulses), and relays them to the brain, where they are processed and interpreted as experience. Each sense corresponds to a specialized class of sensory receptors, each tuned to a particular type of stimulus (e.g., light, pressure, temperature, chemicals), and is connected to specific neural pathways and brain regions.

The “feeling” of sensing—such as seeing a color or feeling pain—is understood as the brain’s interpretation of neural activity. The sensation does not exist independently of the brain; it is a product of electrochemical patterns generated by stimulus-specific neurons.

Here are the major senses as understood in neuroscience, categorized by the type of input they detect:

External Senses (Exteroception):

Vision—Detection of light via photoreceptor cells (rods and cones) in the retina, interpreted by the visual cortex.

Audition (Hearing)—Detection of sound waves via hair cells in the cochlea, processed in the auditory cortex.

Olfaction (Smell)—Detection of airborne chemical molecules via olfactory receptors in the nasal cavity.

Gustation (Taste)—Detection of dissolved chemicals by taste receptor cells on the tongue (sweet, salty, sour, bitter, umami).

Somatosensation (Touch)—A set of senses detecting pressure, vibration, texture, and stretch via mechanoreceptors in the skin.

Internal and Spatial Senses (Interoception and Proprioception):

Thermoception—Detection of temperature changes through thermoreceptors in the skin and internal tissues.

Nociception—Detection of tissue damage or potential harm, experienced as pain; mediated by nociceptors.

Proprioception—Sense of body position and movement, via receptors in muscles, tendons, and joints.

Equilibrioception (Balance)—Detection of head position, acceleration, and orientation through the vestibular system in the inner ear.

Interoception—Awareness of internal physiological states (e.g., hunger, thirst, heartbeat, bladder fullness) detected by receptors in internal organs.

Each of these senses reflects a specialized neural interface with a specific class of physical stimuli. They are not windows to objective reality, but rather biologically evolved tools for survival, shaped by natural selection to interpret the world in ways that were advantageous to our ancestors.

30.3 Jiva

From a secular perspective, the self is not an independent or enduring essence, but rather a process—a dynamic pattern generated by the brain’s activity. It is the emergent result

of interactions among billions of neurons, shaped by genetics, environment, memory, and sensory input. There is no fixed, inner “soul” or metaphysical self; instead, what we call “I” is a constantly updating mental model created by the brain to manage behavior, social interaction, and survival.

The self includes a sense of continuity, identity, and ownership over thoughts and actions, but these are seen as constructs, not realities. The experience of being a unified, conscious agent is real as a phenomenon, but not as a fundamental entity. When the brain ceases to function—through trauma, disease, or death—the self likewise ceases to exist. There is no deeper consciousness behind the brain, and no part of the self survives beyond physical death.

In this view, consciousness itself is not a substance but a function: the brain’s integrated processing of internal and external information. The self, then, is not who we are at a metaphysical level—it is simply how the brain operates when sufficiently complex.

30.4 Avidyā

From a secular perspective, the senses are biological tools evolved for survival, not for perfect or complete perception of reality. Human sensory systems—such as vision, hearing, and touch—are limited in scope, subject to distortion, and influenced by context, expectation, and internal processing. Because of this, sensory perception can be misleading, and what we “experience” is often a constructed interpretation rather than a direct apprehension of the external world.

For example, human vision is limited to a narrow range of the electromagnetic spectrum, typically between about 380 and 740 nanometers—what we call visible light. But we now know, through scientific investigation and instrumentation, that this is only a small slice of the full spectrum. Through technologies such as infrared cameras, ultraviolet imaging, and radio telescopes, we can detect forms of light invisible to the human eye, revealing phenomena—such as the heat signature of a planet or the structure of a galaxy—that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Our auditory system is likewise limited: we can hear only a specific range of frequencies (roughly 20 Hz to 20 kHz). Yet with microphones, frequency analyzers, and other tools, we can detect both subsonic and ultrasonic sounds—vibrations that other animals, like elephants or bats, perceive naturally, but which lie outside our innate capacity.

Even our sense of time and motion can be deceptive. We can perceive continuous movement in film or animation due to persistence of vision. We are susceptible to optical illusions, such as seeing motion where there is none, or misjudging size and color based on background context. Illusions like the Müller-Lyer illusion or the dress that appears blue/black or white/gold are clear examples of subjective perception differing from objective stimuli.

Science addresses these sensory limitations by creating tools that extend or clarify perception. Telescopes reveal distant galaxies. Electron microscopes show the structure of atoms and

viruses. Particle detectors allow us to infer the presence of fundamental particles we cannot see. Spectrometers tell us what distant stars are made of. MRI and EEG machines let us visualize brain activity that is otherwise hidden.

Importantly, we do not blindly trust these instruments—their results are validated by coherence with other measurements, repeatability, and predictive success. For instance, we trust a camera lens to capture a scene because its output aligns with what we see—and when used in scientific contexts, the data it collects can be independently verified, reproduced, and used to make accurate predictions.

Thus, in the materialist view, the senses are fallible but not useless. They are starting points. Science and technology form a self-correcting process that tests, refines, and expands our understanding of the world, allowing us to build a more reliable and objective picture of reality—one that reaches far beyond what our evolved biology alone can provide.

30.5 Vāsanā

From a secular perspective, desire is a natural phenomenon arising from the brain's biological and evolutionary programming. It is not a metaphysical force or illusion, but the result of neurochemical signals—primarily involving dopamine, serotonin, and other neurotransmitters—that guide behavior toward outcomes associated with survival and reproduction. Desire functions as a motivational system: organisms that seek food, safety, social bonds, and pleasure are more likely to thrive and pass on their genes. These impulses are shaped by both genetic predispositions and personal experience, and they become reinforced through memory and learning. While desires can lead to fulfillment, they can also produce suffering when frustrated—not because of ignorance of a higher self, but because the brain evolved to be vigilant, reactive, and oriented toward scarcity. In this view, there is no deeper reality behind desire; it is a function of the material brain operating in a complex environment.

30.6 Maturity of the Jīva and the levels of embodied life

From a secular perspective, the diversity of living forms arises through natural evolutionary processes, not through spiritual maturity or metaphysical law. There is no inherent hierarchy of life, no upward path of consciousness, and no inner essence progressing through stages of embodiment. All life—from bacteria to humans—is the product of differential survival and reproduction over time. A mammal may be more structurally complex than a bacterium, but complexity does not imply superiority. A bacterium may survive in environments of extreme heat, pressure, or acidity where no mammal could live. Likewise, insects may outnumber and outlast more neurologically advanced species. What we observe is not a ladder of being, but a branching and adaptive network of organisms—each shaped by its own ecological pressures. In this view, humans are one successful branch of life, but not the culmination or goal of evolution. All organisms are equally natural expressions of physical processes, and none

carries special status in terms of what is ultimately real.

30.7 Memory as a function of the mind

From a secular perspective, memory is not a subtle function of an immaterial mind, but a physical process rooted in the structure and activity of the brain. It emerges from the complex network of neurons and synapses that form the brain's architecture. When experiences occur, patterns of neural activity leave behind changes in the strength and configuration of synaptic connections. These changes encode information, forming what are commonly called memory traces.

Memory, in this view, is not a static record, but a dynamic reconstruction. Recalling an event does not simply retrieve an unchanging copy; it reactivates and reshapes the neural pattern based on current context, emotion, and attention. There are many forms of memory—short-term, long-term, procedural, emotional—each with its own neural circuitry. Some memories are vivid and conscious; others operate below awareness but still influence behavior, learning, and habit.

There is no separate self that “owns” or “stores” memories beyond the brain itself. What we experience as continuity of identity over time is, in this view, the result of neural structures preserving and replaying consistent information about past experiences. While memory may give rise to a sense of narrative selfhood, it is seen as an emergent property of brain function, not evidence of an enduring inner essence.

30.8 Memory as a function of the mind

From a secular perspective, the inner workings of the mind are understood as emergent properties of the physical brain. There are no immaterial faculties or metaphysical instruments; instead, what are traditionally described as thought, decision, emotion, and identity are all seen as the results of electrical and chemical processes within networks of neurons. These processes give rise to distinct but interrelated mental functions, each of which plays a role in cognition and behavior.

- **Sensory processing and emotional reaction** correspond to what might traditionally be called the lower mind. These include the brain's rapid response to sensory input, pattern recognition, emotional valence, and instinctive reactions. These processes often operate unconsciously and are linked to areas such as the amygdala and lower cortical centers.
- **Reasoning and decision-making** are associated with higher-order brain functions, particularly in the prefrontal cortex. This includes the ability to weigh evidence, deliberate, plan, and choose between alternatives. These capacities are considered evolutionary developments that enhance problem-solving and long-term survival.

- **The sense of self or personal identity**—the “I” that seems to own thoughts and actions—is viewed as a constructed narrative generated by the brain. This sense of ownership and continuity is not a separate entity, but an integration of memory, bodily sensation, emotion, and social learning. While it feels central to experience, it is ultimately a functional byproduct of the brain’s capacity to model itself and maintain coherence over time.

Though these aspects are functionally distinct, they are not separate in substance. They emerge from a single, unified material system—the brain—whose complexity gives rise to the diverse range of mental phenomena we experience. There is no enduring self behind these functions; only the ever-changing interplay of physical processes.

30.9 Habitual behavior and the patterning of the Jīva

From a secular perspective, habitual behavior is explained through physical processes in the brain and nervous system. When a behavior is repeated—whether emotional, physical, or cognitive—the neural circuits involved become more strongly connected through a process known as synaptic reinforcement. Over time, these pathways become more efficient, and the behavior becomes automatic. This process is observable in both conscious habits, like brushing teeth, and unconscious ones, like flinching at a sound. The brain naturally conserves energy by favoring familiar patterns, making change difficult but not impossible.

While Advaita and neuroscience differ fundamentally in their metaphysics, both recognize the power of repetition and the difficulty of breaking habitual patterns. Where Advaita sees habits as arising within illusion and reinforcing the false self, neuroscience sees them as physical adaptations to past conditions. In both views, habitual behavior constrains freedom—though the paths to overcoming it diverge sharply.

Glossary

Term	Pronunciation	Definition
<i>Adhyāsa</i>	<i>uhd-HYAA-suh</i>	Superimposition; the mistaken projection of one thing onto another, like self onto body or world onto Brahman.
<i>Advaita</i>	<i>uhd-VAI-tuh</i>	“Not two.” The central concept of non-duality in Śaṅkara’s philosophy, asserting that the true Self (Ātman) and Brahman are one and the same.
<i>Advaita Vedānta</i>	<i>uhd-VAI-tuh</i> <i>vay-DAH-N-tuh</i>	A school of Hindu philosophy emphasizing non-dualism, based on the teachings of the Upaniṣads as interpreted by Śaṅkara.
<i>Ahaṁkāra</i>	<i>uh-HUM-kaa-rah</i>	The ego; the false sense of doership and individuality.
<i>Ātman</i>	<i>AHT-mun</i>	The true Self, pure awareness, identical with Brahman in Advaita.
<i>Avidyā</i>	<i>uh-VID-yah</i>	Ignorance or misapprehension of reality, the root cause of bondage and illusion of multiplicity and change.
<i>Avidyā-leśa</i>	<i>uh-VID-yah</i> <i>LAY-shuh</i>	A residual trace of ignorance; lingers even in the realized one’s appearance and actions.
<i>Brahman</i>	<i>BRUH-mun</i>	The ultimate, infinite, indivisible reality that is the source and substance of all.
<i>Buddhi</i>	<i>BOODH-dhee</i>	The faculty of higher intellect or discernment within the inner instrument of the mind.
<i>Deva</i>	<i>DAY-vuh</i>	A celestial or divine being; commonly translated as “god” or “shining one.”
<i>Dvaita</i>	<i>DVAI-tuh</i>	Dualism; the belief in a fundamental distinction between the self and the divine, subject and object.
<i>Guru</i>	<i>GOO-roo</i>	A spiritual teacher or guide who dispels ignorance.
<i>Īśvara</i>	<i>EESH-va-rah</i>	The personal Lord within appearance; Brahman reflected through māyā, who governs the world and dispenses karma.
<i>Jīva</i>	<i>JEE-vuh</i>	The individual self; the soul that experiences bondage under illusion of multiplicity and change.
<i>Jīvanmukta</i>	<i>JEE-vun-MOOK-tuh</i>	One who is liberated while still living in the body.
<i>Karma</i>	<i>KAR-muh</i>	Action; the principle of cause and effect whereby deeds shape future experience.

Term	Pronunciation	Definition
<i>Lakṣaṇā</i>	<i>luk-SHUH-nah</i>	Secondary or implied meaning used when a literal reading leads to contradiction. Śaṅkara employs lakṣaṇā to interpret key non-dual statements (mahāvākyas), allowing deeper truths to be conveyed indirectly.
<i>Manas</i>	<i>MUH-nuss</i>	The lower mind; responsible for processing sensory input and forming intentions.
<i>Māyā</i>	<i>MAH-yah</i>	The illusory power that makes the unreal appear real and the One appear as many.
<i>Mokṣa</i>	<i>MOKE-sha</i>	Liberation from bondage and the cycle of rebirth; realization of one's true nature as Brahman.
<i>Nāmarūpa</i>	<i>NAH-mah-ROO-pah</i>	"Name and form"; the apparent multiplicity of objects in the world.
<i>Pramāṇa</i>	<i>pruh-MAA-nuh</i>	A valid means of knowledge; in Advaita, includes perception, inference, and scriptural testimony.
<i>Saṃsāra</i>	<i>sum-SAAR-uh</i>	The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth conditioned by karma and ignorance.
<i>Saṃskāra</i>	<i>sum-SKAA-rah</i>	Mental impressions or latent tendencies formed by past experiences and actions.
<i>Śaṅkara</i>	<i>SHUN-kah-rah</i>	The 8th-century philosopher and theologian who systematized Advaita Vedānta. Also called Śaṅkarācārya.
<i>Smṛti</i>	<i>SMRIT-ee</i>	"That which is remembered"; traditional texts like the epics and Dharmaśāstras, based on but secondary to śruti.
<i>Śravaṇa</i>	<i>SHRUV-uh-nuh</i>	Hearing or studying spiritual truths, especially scriptural teachings.
<i>Śruti</i>	<i>SHROO-tee</i>	"That which is heard"; the Vedas, considered revealed scripture in Hindu tradition.
<i>Tat tvam asi</i>	<i>TUT tvuhm UH-see</i>	"That Thou Art"; a central Upaniṣadic teaching that the self is none other than Brahman.
<i>Vairāgya</i>	<i>vai-RAHG-yuh</i>	Dispassion or detachment from sense pleasures and worldly concerns.
<i>Vāsanā</i>	<i>VAH-suh-nah</i>	Deep-seated desires or tendencies that shape thought and behavior.
<i>Vedānta</i>	<i>vay-DAHN-tuh</i>	"End of the Vedas"; the philosophical conclusions drawn from the Upaniṣads.
<i>Viveka</i>	<i>vi-VAY-kuh</i>	Discernment between the real and the unreal, the eternal and the transient.

Term	Pronunciation	Definition
<i>vyāvahāra</i>	<i>vyaa-vuh-HAA-rah</i>	The empirical or transactional level of reality, where the world, actions, and ethics appear real. Though ultimately illusory, it remains valid for daily life and spiritual practice.