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ADVAITA & SCIENCE – A FINAL RECONCILIATION (A Grand Unified Theory of Spirituality & Science)

Science and religion have not ordinarily agreed with each other. There are several areas of contention between the two.

(The word 'religion' is often used to denote the ritualistic aspects of religion. However, the true meaning of the word, and the sense in which it is used in this article, is to indicate a genuine search for the truth about life. To avoid confusion, we will henceforth use the word 'spirituality' instead to denote such a search).

Some of these points of contention are :

- the existence of a 'soul,'
- the existence of 'free will' (versus genes, conditioning and chance),
- the existence of rebirth,
- the existence of God,
- and reliance on faith versus reliance on experimental proof.

Science denies that the first four exist (for it has found neither proof nor any place for them), and refuses to take their existence simply as a matter of faith. But what happens if we conduct research in spirituality while applying the scientific method? Can we find a model of spirituality which agrees with science on all these points? Interestingly, we can. Not only that, if we delve a little further, we will find that all the mystics and sages have been pointing to this very same philosophy from time immemorial.

In its most explicit form, this philosophy is found in the form of the Hindu Vedantic doctrine of *Advaita*. (For those unfamiliar with this doctrine, a short note is appended at the end of this article). In this philosophy, there is no separate, autonomous, individual soul. (There is an illusion of a separate soul). As there is no separate soul, there can be no question of either free will or of rebirth (free will and rebirth for whom?). The reality of God according to this theory is that he is the Universal Consciousness, the Source or Ground of all being, and not a personal, anthropomorphic, all-powerful entity. And finally, these things are definitely not asked to be accepted on trust. The individual is encouraged to find out for himself and confirm and corroborate these findings on his own.

Nor does this really contradict conventional religion, even religions other than Hinduism. The apparent contradictions are because the religions (or the various sages) talk at different levels of reality, in consideration of the pre-existing beliefs of the listener. But when speaking at the highest level of reality, most religions as also the sages and mystics affirm this same monistic truth. Several of Jesus' sayings (for example, "I and my father are one"), and the teachings of Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart and St. Augustine can be clearly seen to have monistic meanings. The Buddha appears to have restricted himself to the practical aspect of this same

teaching, not wanting his disciples to merely speculate on its theoretical considerations and end up in sterile intellectual debates. He taught that there is no separate soul or *atman* (the doctrine of *anatta* or *anatma*), while refusing to speculate on the *Paramatman* (Universal Consciousness), asking his followers to experience it for themselves – indeed a highly scientific approach. Zen and Taoism too taught much the same principles. And so did Sufism. In fact, Islam is the one religion which simply refuses to speak of an anthropomorphic God, and insists that He is formless. In Judaism God is called Jehovah (Yhwh or Yahweh) which means 'I am that I am,' clearly indicating the primary Consciousness which enables anyone to know that one exists.

As *Advaita* can be shown to be quite scientific in temper, modern science, on its part, is closing in on this philosophy. Modern science, especially quantum mechanics, gives us a completely different world view of reality from that so far given to us by classical 'Newtonian' physics. In fact, it shows that classical physics, or the world 'as we know it,' is merely a 'special case scenario' of the more comprehensive new physics. In fact the world-view of modern science comes remarkably close to that of *Advaita*, and several books have been published correlating the theory of *Advaita* with modern science (1) to (5). Some recent scientific discoveries also correlate very well with this theory, for example, discoveries of the way the brain functions (6) and the discovery of the so-called Zero-Point Field (7).

The only point on which there is still confusion between science and this comprehensive, monistic spirituality, is the final question of whether there is 'something' behind all this, or whether there is 'nothing.' Religions unanimously uphold the former view – even Buddhism (which some believe to be nihilistic). The Buddha said:

"There is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed. If there were not this Unborn, this Unoriginated, this Uncreated, this Unformed, release from the world of the born, the originated, the created, the formed would not be possible."

Science, however, has so far tilted towards the latter, nihilistic opinion only because of its old, classical moorings. Science has so far presupposed that materialism is the primary reality and Consciousness is an 'Epiphenomenon' of this reality. However, this fails to explain many aspects of the modern physics, and glaring holes are now visible in this classical world-view. (To give just two examples, the 'quantum' jump made by an electron from one orbit to another without passing through the intervening space; and the Aspect experiment which showed that two electrons can instantaneously affect one another however far apart they are in space – a phenomenon called non-locality). On the other hand, if Consciousness is taken as the primary reality, almost all the contradictions immediately resolve themselves. This is also exactly what mystics over the ages have been saying. And really, to presuppose that materialism is the primary reality, indeed, to presuppose anything (and to stick to it in spite of the many contradictions that become apparent based on this presupposition), is in itself highly unscientific. So the least we could do is to examine the alternative paradigm with an open mind – the alternative paradigm being identical with the main *Advaitic* teaching, that Consciousness, and not matter, is the primary reality and the ground of all being (8).

But apart from the scientific angle, our theory must also be able to satisfactorily explain the oft mentioned spiritual phenomena of Enlightenment and Liberation, and also the mystery of God. Let us see if our theory can do so.

If Consciousness is taken as the One Reality, then all the teachings of the sages immediately become relevant. The core of the teaching of the sages has been that Consciousness is one, in

other words, that we are not separate psychological entities. The sages have always maintained that our sense of separateness is an illusion. It is only man that suffers from this unique delusion of being a separate entity, of 'having' a 'soul.' Occasionally, a rare human being sees through this illusion, and such a person is then said to be illumined or Enlightened.

What exactly is this phenomenon called Enlightenment? Let us first understand it in simple terms, and then try to explain it in the scientific, medical and psychological context. To understand what is Enlightenment, we must first understand the basic premise or contention that the sages have taught. As we just mentioned this is, stated simply, that Consciousness is one, and that our sense of being separate psychological entities with separate individual consciousnesses is an illusion. Philosopher J.Krishnamurti said "... it is not a fact that one's consciousness is totally separate from that of everybody else – one sees that separateness is an illusion ... one is the whole of mankind – not an individual consciousness ... one's consciousness is the consciousness of mankind." (9). This means that the separate we's and you's that we imagine as distinct psychological entities or as separate bits of consciousness, do not really exist as such. True, there are discrete body-mind units. But the idea of separate individual consciousnesses or individual souls *inhabiting* those body-mind units is a myth. The Upanishads say "*Ayam aatmaa Brahman*" meaning that this (apparently discrete individual) soul is (the same as) *Brahman* or the Universal Consciousness. Here *Brahman* should be understood as the one (Universal) Consciousness, as the Upanishads clearly state that "*Prajnanam Brahma*" or Consciousness is *Brahman*. These two statements taken together clearly mean that *Brahman* is the Universal Consciousness, and the apparent individualized consciousness is really *Brahman*, with a superimposed illusion of separateness. Thus the separate me's and you's which we expect will survive our mortal bodies as separate entities, do not exist. The separate body-minds are animated by the one Universal Consciousness just as the consciousness of a novelist animates all the characters in his novel. Jalal-ud-din Rumi, the Turkish Sufi mystic of the middle ages, sang:

Who are we, O Thou soul of our souls,
that we should remain in being beside thee?

We and our existences are really non-existence;
thou art the absolute Being which manifests the perishable.

We all are lions, but lions on a banner:
because of the wind they are rushing onward from moment to moment. . . .

. . . Our wind whereby we are moved and our being are of thy gift;
our whole existence is from thy bringing into being.

Mesnavi Book I, 599-607

Advaita is often misunderstood to mean that everything is an illusion. Let us be clear about this – Consciousness is not an illusion – but the psychological separateness is! Consciousness includes the sense of being alive, being aware, being able to touch, taste, see, hear, feel, sense, act. That does exist. What is illusory is our idea of a 'who' that is doing all of these things – a 'who' that is expected to survive the death of the body. Touching, tasting, sensing does occur, but there is no entity, no *one* who touches, tastes, senses. In other words, there is no subject, there is only Subjectivity. And Absolute Subjectivity is the Universal Consciousness which is not a 'who' at all – it is impersonal.

. . . man's obsessive consciousness of, and insistence on being a separate self is the final and most formidable obstacle to the unitive knowledge of God. To be a self is . . . the original sin, and to die to self . . . is the final virtue.

Aldous Huxley (10)

Now perhaps we could try to understand what the phenomenon of Enlightenment is all about. Enlightenment is the actual realisation or intuitive perception (not just belief or intellectual understanding) of this truth – namely, the oneness of Consciousness and the absence of separateness. The mystic *sees* that he is not a separate individualized consciousness or soul, but that he is the one singular Consciousness which is also called by some, God. Seeing this directly for oneself is Enlightenment. Jesus said, "That they all may be One; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they too may be One in us" (11).

We must understand that Enlightenment is not some esoteric, magical process. Enlightenment does not give a man magical powers, or make him a superman. Enlightenment is simply the disappearance of an illusion which made him see everything from the point of view of a 'me.' Enlightenment does not make a person all-knowing. When the scriptures talk of spiritual 'knowledge' that occurs upon Enlightenment, we must realise that they are not referring to any form of verbal, temporal knowledge. This is not a knowledge which can be learnt or developed in time. The word knowledge here refers to the true insight, the intuitive perception which is Enlightenment. Enlightenment is thus a change in perspective, a change of focus, a paradigm shift. It is a shift from the constricting, individual focus of a 'me' to a view of life in its totality. It is a shift from being a circle with the illusory 'me' as center, to a circle "whose circumference is everywhere and whose center is nowhere." Thus the knowledge that comes with Enlightenment is not a temporal knowledge but is rather an intuitive insight into the way things are in their totality.

How can we explain Enlightenment in medical terms?

To begin with, it can be shown that man's persistent belief in his separate selfhood is a result of his capacity for symbolic thought, which gives him the *ability* to conceptualize 'himself' as something over and above (and apart from) the body-mind. It also, by providing him with the rather unpalatable knowledge of his own mortality, gives him *incentive* enough to conceptualize himself as a separate entity which will survive the death of the body.

The actual mechanism of this illusion is also easily explained. It is known that the left cerebral hemisphere is responsible for verbal and logical knowledge and skills. One of its functions is to relate different events logically and make sense out of them. The left brain takes unrelated events and attempts to relate them by concocting a 'story.' It is the left hemisphere which does the job of selecting from the abundance of sensory inputs that the brain is bombarded with, and by its selective editing it tries to maintain a coherent belief system, a 'consistent storyline.' The left hemisphere's job is thus to create a working model of the world and try to maintain it at all costs. The right hemisphere, on the other hand, tries to detect anomalies.

It is the left part of the brain which is thus responsible for the illusion of a 'self' and the illusion of separateness from the rest of the universe. The belief in a separate 'self' is programmed into our brains right from the early formative years of childhood (by parents, religion and society), and it seems to fit in rather neatly with our linear, symbolic way of thinking. The left brain then builds further on this framework. It, by its very nature, tends to selectively pick up and remember events which would seem to support this belief, and selectively (unconsciously) edits those which

point against it. By this constant 'filtering' of information, it thus maintains this fiction of a separate 'self'.

But there is a threshold level upto which this selective editing can be successfully carried out by the left brain. This level is different in different people. Depending upon the level of this threshold, (which is, in simple words, the strength with which a person clings to his beliefs), even obvious inconsistencies pointed out by the right brain may be ignored. But when this threshold level is surpassed, something dramatic happens. When the anomalous information from the right brain reaches this threshold, it forces the left hemisphere to revise the entire model and start from scratch. This is a paradigm shift. The left brain tries to cling to the existing model, the right tries to force paradigm shifts.

Enlightenment is a paradigm shift – the most radical that there can be. The entire old, individualistic, me-centred world-view is ripped up, and is replaced by a new world-view which is no more me-based, but is instead universal in outlook – where everything is seen not as from a center, the 'me,' but 'from no center at all,' as J.Krishnamurti has said.

That is why Enlightenment is sudden (though its effects will be gradual). It is not a question of a slow transformation, rather it is a total scrapping of an old model and its replacement with a new one. Only in this case, there is no new 'model' in the real sense of the word. There is no more a 'storyline'. That is why things are seen 'as they are' and 'from no center at all'. The brain has realised that *there need not be a storyline*. It no more burdens itself by constantly trying to 'fit things into the picture.'

The effects of Enlightenment – deconditioning, Liberation.

Enlightenment, says spiritual tradition, results in a complete transformation of the individual. Indian philosophy calls it *paraavritti*, the West has called it *metanoia*. Christ referred to it as returning to the mother's womb and being born again. It is a complete 'transcendence of personality,' a total, 'inside-out' transformation:

What is night to all beings, to him that is day, and what to them is day, that is to him night.

Bhagavad Gita, II-69

This is the beatific condition called Liberation.

Once Enlightenment has occurred, the whole world, and life itself, is seen in an altogether different light. The average man's thoughts are usually me-centred or me-based. After Enlightenment, the me is seen as an illusion, and all me-centred thoughts are therefore seen to be invalid and void. This does not mean that they disappear overnight. Initially they do occur. But before the involvement can become deeper, the clear perception that the 'me' is an illusion puts a brake on the thought chain and the me-centred thoughts are seen as the anomalies that they are – based on an illusion, the non-existent, phantom 'me.' This, in effect, is a process of de-conditioning (from the earlier me-based conditioning which is the bane of every man and is the cause of me-based or psychological suffering). Over the years, as the de-conditioning proceeds to its logical culmination, a point arrives when the me-based thoughts do not arise at all. This is what is called Liberation, *mukti*, *moksha*, *nirvana*, the Kingdom of God. The Liberated one is completely free of the me-illusion and its effects, and free of psychological suffering.

Having realized his own self as the (Universal) Self, a man becomes selfless; and in virtue of selflessness he is to be conceived as unconditioned. . . . through selflessness he has no part in pleasure or pain . . .

Maitrayana Upanishad (12)

In conclusion, the sage is a person who has "purged himself of selfness," whose personal "I" is dead.

I live, yet not I, but Christ – the eternal Logos – liveth in me.

St.Paul

And the "not-I" which remains is the same as what other people call 'God.'

So then, finally, what is God?

God or the Truth or Reality is simply the Consciousness or Energy which animates our bodies and sees the Universe through our senses. It is another name for the Subjectivity which perceives all the objects through "us." (It only appears as if "we" are doing the seeing. In fact "we" are mere apparitions, illusions, which arise in the body-minds during the process of seeing). Thus God is the real I which is even more proximate than the fictitious I which we normally identify with. So It is what remains when the fictitious I has disappeared. It is the sight behind our eyes, the very "seeingness" with which things are seen, the "knowingness" by which anything is known. Now we can understand why the scriptures repeatedly state that the Reality cannot be known. For It to be known would mean that knowingness must know itself. And for "us" to know It would mean that "we" be the subjects and It the object – a complete reversal of roles, for in fact, It is the Universal Subject and "we" are objects perceived in Its light. How can "we" know It, and by whose light?

Even when "we" talk about It, the "It" that we conceptualise is not the real It. The real It is That by which we are doing this very conceptualising. Indeed, in reality we cannot talk or even think about It for It is that which is doing the thinking.

You cannot think about God because it is He who is doing the thinking.

Ken Wilber

Can the dagger stab itself? Can the hand grasp itself? Can the ocean dive into itself? Can the eye see itself? Can the tongue taste itself? Can the flower smell its own perfume?
Jnaneshwar

Can the mirror reflect itself?

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A Note on Advaita

Advaita is the Hindu or Vedantic name for the doctrine of monism. *Advaita* can be literally translated as 'adualism' or 'non-dualism,' but is generally referred to as 'monism.' It is not the same as monotheism, which is the belief that there is only one God (as contrasted with polytheism which believes in many gods). *Advaita* is not even the same as pan-theism ("all things are God"). The basic principle of *Advaita* is that there ARE no 'things' – there is only God. In other words, all that exists, is God – 'things' are mere appearances.

The basic tenets of *Advaita* could be stated very briefly as follows :

1. There is One basic underlying Reality or Source of the entire manifestation, which is variously called *Brahman*, *Nirguna* (attributeless) *Brahman*, Consciousness (*Prajna*) or just 'THAT' (*Tat*).

Unlike the common perception of God, in reality God is not a person - 'God' in *Advaita* refers to this same impersonal, indefinable force. This force cannot be accurately described in words, and so any description must be accepted with that caveat.

2. The *Nirguna Brahman* has not CREATED the manifestation (phenomenal universe), it has BECOME the manifestation, and that too, ONLY IN APPEARANCE. In this becoming, the essential nature of *Brahman* remains unchanged (indeed *Brahman* is, by its very nature, changeless). In other words, this becoming is only an APPARENT becoming. The example given is that of a screen (*Brahman*) and the pictures projected on it (the manifestation).

3. 'We,' as the separate individual entities that we unquestioningly take ourselves to be, are also not different from *Brahman* or the Source. Our sense of being separate psychological entities each with our own separate individual consciousness, IS AN ILLUSION caused by our distorted or defective way of thinking. This delusory power of our thinking is termed *maya*.

We are not even a 'part' of *Brahman* in the sense of being a 'small part of a bigger whole.' We ARE *Brahman* by another name.

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