

Vedanta: Three Paths to Truth

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MANY of us use terms like Brahman, Atman, Ishwara and Moksha, but some of us don't know their exact meaning and application. An intellectual understanding of this is imperative to progress spiritually.

Soul, universe, and God — these are the cornerstones of philosophy. Consider a triangle. Its one end is God or Truth or Reality or Whatever-Its-name-is. The second corner is yourself, and the third end is the universe. Now, what is the relation between (a) you and Reality, (b) you and the universe, and (c) universe and God? To know this is called Vedanta.

Let us take Advaita (Monism) as propounded by Shankara. Shankara says: "What's this triangle business — yourself, universe, etc? There is only one Reality, the Absolute". Advaita means Oneness. Shankara calls this Brahman. 'Brahman' simply means 'vast', and that alone exists. So please forget the lower two corners of your triangle. But you'll ask: "What about me and the universe?" Shankara replies: "It's all false, a superimposition (adhyasa) on the Reality." He explains "There is only Brahman.

But somehow there's illusion too called Maya. This Maya, again, is ignorance (avidya).

This ignorance is primordial, and has two powers: to envelope Reality (avarana) and to project illusion (vikshepa)".

"Now, ignorance has enveloped Brahman and the so-called enveloped Brahman is called Ishwara. Brahman plus Maya is Ishwara. When Brahman becomes Ishwara in the causal state of the universe, Maya uses its second power of projection. So the universe and you and others appear to be created. Thus the self-same Brahman appears as many, which is illusion. Your body and mind too are illusory, but not 'you'. You are Brahman, or Atman in the individual case. Because Maya deludes you and you think 'many' is real, body and mind alone are real, you are limited, and not the Atman. This leads to suffering".

Shankara continues. "To overcome suffering, you should know the Truth. Knowledge leads to liberation — nothing else. This liberation is called Mukti or Moksha. Moksha from what? Moksha doesn't mean evaporating into thin air and becoming nothing. It is liberation from ignorance and suffering. You

thought you are the mind and body, performed actions, and their karmic effects bound you to the world. Release from this bondage, which is nothing but ignorance, is moksha. How to attain Moksha? By knowing the Truth. The illumined teacher can remove your ignorance in a trice by declaring that you are Brahman. Then the false triangle that you imagined will go and what was there remains. But you'll not be annihilated, you'll become vast. Brahman means bliss. You'll become bliss itself. This is called Being in enlightened Bliss (Satchidananda)".

Then comes the Vishistha advaitin or Qualified Non-Dualist, Ramanuja. He exclaims: "Who said all this is false or illusory? What's this Maya business? Is all this beautiful universe false or magic then? No, they are true, but true in Brahman. That is, there's only one Reality or Brahman, who without being affected in any way gets transformed (parinama) into the universe and yourself. Your triangle is all right, but the two corners are true as God's qualities. That is, when you remember someone you remember him as wearing clothes, too. So think

of the universe and yourself as qualities of Brahman, whom I also call Narayana or Ishwara. God is inherent in everything." According to Ramanuja, when you attain liberation through devotion to God or by surrender, you don't become Brahman, you'll be separate but without any limitations, and will be near God, serving Him.

Finally comes Madhva, the Dualist or Dvaitin. He says "Please forget this illusion business. Understand that your triangle is absolutely true. Yourself, the universe and God are all separate and true. The Efficient Cause, God, whom I call Vishnu, hasn't manufactured you but His power Prakriti has. You are separate from Him for ever, You are limited. He is unlimited. You are suffering because of bad actions. Pray to Him, adore Him, and you will enjoy bliss and be eternally near Him. Moksha is nothing but being near God". Shaivites and Shaktas too accept this philosophy but say that God is Shiva or Shakti, respectively.

Thus there are several opinions. Sri Ramakrishna said that all are different viewpoints, all are true. Let's grasp and hold on to one, proceed, and become free.



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