

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF ADVAITA VEDANTA

Non-duality, consciousness and the nature of the subject & object relationship.

The following essay is a brief summary of Advaita Vedanta, one of the main philosophical systems of India, and it covers some of the key concepts addressed by Advaita Vedanta that relate to my creative work. Having been a constant practitioner of Advaita Vedanta and a not so constant 'Sunday' practitioner of Zen Buddhism for the last 12 years I have endeavored to make this part of the foundation of my life and artistic practice, both theoretically and practically. I have always tried to understand how a 2500-year-old spiritual system can be practical and harmonious with modern life and thought and I hope this essay goes a little way towards addressing that, at least in my mind.

I: Brahman and nonduality.

The central position of the Advaita Vedanta tradition is that in reality there is no difference between consciousness and the universe, no real distinction between the individual, the entire universe and God, Brahman. Advaita (literally meaning "not two" or non-dual), declares that the universe is a manifestation of one undifferentiated reality, expressed in Sanskrit as Brahman, neuter in gender it literally means "growth", "development", "swelling" or the "Supreme transcendent and immanent Reality or the One Godhead".

Sankara (788-820.ad), one of Advaita's greatest exponents describes the nature of Brahman as such:

"That which permeates all, which nothing transcends and which, like the universal space around us, fills everything completely from within and without, that Supreme nondual Brahman - that thou art."
(Gupta. 1995)

Advaita Vedanta suggests that this nondual state of mind can be realized personally, in experience, aided by certain contemplative practices such as meditation. While Advaita has a rich, broad and vigorous intellectual aspect it must be stressed that it always puts forward personal experience as the only way to fully understand what it means when it states; "The Supreme Soul of the universe, the limitless being - I am that." Amritbindu Upanishad.
(Gupta. 1995)

2: A Perennial Philosophy of Non-duality?

Nondual philosophical systems are not rare, various forms of Buddhism are strongly nondual and one could suggest that a great deal of the world's mystics speak of nondual a nondual experience of union with God, even if not supported by the orthodox view of their particular faith. In many ways Advaita Vedanta is also an Eastern form of Idealism (think Plato, Plotinus, Kant or Hegel), suggesting that mind or consciousness, which at its root emanates from God, is the essence or meaning of the phenomenal reality.

At the heart of its philosophical system Advaita rests on the personal experience of a nondual state of being. Here one's normal sense of a distinction between the subject and the object is experienced as nonexistent, all forms, whether another person, a bird, a sight, sound, thought or feeling become part and parcel of one's very awareness, a spontaneous manifestation of

that awareness. Ken Wilbur, a contemporary exponent of nonduality, states that the experience of nonduality manifests in many ways but exhibits the same fundamental structure across culture:

"...say that you have a powerful experience of cosmic consciousness, or a sense of being one with the entire manifest world. Now the deep pattern of that experience is quite similar no matter what culture it appears in--you can have this experience of oneness if you are Chinese, Indian, German, or Mexican, living now or a thousand years ago... But the actual contours, contexts, surface features, and specific meanings of that experience will usually vary from culture to culture and even from person to person... Likewise, the various waves (or stages) of consciousness that unfold in meditators show certain context-transcending similarities."

(Wilber. 2004)

This experience lies at the heart of Advaita and forms the foundation upon which both its practice and thought is referred to, along with other nondual traditions like Zen, Advaita sets forward several transpersonal (as beyond just a personal or individual sense of self) states of individual development leading up to the experience of nonduality. Psychologists Brown and Engler, in *Transformations of Consciousness*, (a wonderful book exploring the relationship between Yoga, Buddhist and Christian contemplative stages) examined whether these transpersonal stages of being, suggested by the great contemplative traditions, "may be said to exist in any objective fashion (i.e., possess external validity); and 2), if these stages do possess external validity, to what extent are they cross-cultural or quasi-universal?" they then present substantial evidence to suggest that;

"the stages of meditation are in fact 'real' - that is, they seem to represent demonstratable cognitive, perceptual, and affective changes that follow a developmental-stage model... [and] that the stages of meditation are in fact of cross-cultural and universal applicability."

(Brown, 1986: Pg 219)

Studies looking at the effect of contemplative practice on the brain also support the mystic's claim that these contemplative states are most definitely 'real', universally applicable and distinct from the normal dualistic perception of the world. (Austin, 1988) and Richard Davidson's recent work with the Dalai Lama, examining the increase of gamma wave activity and positive mental states being just two interesting studies out of several thousand academic papers and books on the topic.

3: How does Non-duality relate to duality?

Now, if the experience of a nondual state of being is 'real', several questions arise, such as; in what sense is the state 'real', what knowledge do these states provide, does it in any way relate to the physical structure of reality, how do dual and nondual states relate to each other, or how does the normal dual sense of life relate to a unified whole if it does at all? And how can this distinction between 'me' and everything else, the subject and the object change, and knowing that it can what is the value of each state of being? And of course the 'hard problem', how does mind, consciousness arise or relate to body or matter, how can we make rational sense of an experience that suggests to us that consciousness and matter are one undivided field? Having thought of such an extensive list of interesting questions I am sorry to say I won't attempt to answer them just now but will save them for another day and another essay, maybe even two, however as we are looking

at Advaita Vedanta I will put forward the way Advaita attempts to address a few of these problems as best I can understand.

Firstly Advaita Vedanta, together with other spiritual traditions, makes a distinction between relative truth and absolute truth. The former referring to the relative knowledge of the normal, dualistic world and the latter to the knowledge that comes with the experience of non-duality. (Gupta. 1995: Pg 15) From the absolute perspective Vedanta emphatically states (along with all philosophers of nondual traditions, from the Buddha & Pseudo Dionysius to Plotinus & Meister Eckhart) that the relationship between the subject and object, can only be truly discovered when one's personal consciousness transcends all limits and directly awakens to non-duality. Vedanta would also state that what I just wrote are only words and just as reading the menu is in no way similar to eating the tuna steak, or crème brulee, a theoretical argument for nonduality is not the same as the rich and profound experience of it. Or as the Mahayana Sutra says;

"The truth was never preached by the Buddha, seeing that you have to realize it within yourself."

After all any discussion of a nondual experience is bound to be filled with paradoxes and contradictions, language inherently referring to subjects and objects and their distinguishing characteristics. (Wilber.2000.B) I guess we have quiet a few words for nondual, unified, whole, omnipresent, numinous, timeless, infinite, sublime and transcendent experiences but like the word transcendent they always seem to leave out another aspect, such as the incredibly immanent, immediate and intimate quality of the experience. Maybe that's why many mystics suggest silence is the best way to express the inexpressible.

4: Maya - The Illusion of Duality.

Anyway, back to the topic... While Advaita suggests that in the ultimate analysis, in full "moksha" or liberation from the limited sense of self, the world is experienced as nondual, it also fully recognizes that we normally experience life in terms of duality. Given that Advaita puts forward a nondual field of existence as the ground to the universe and also as the ground and basis of human experience it then suggests we are in a sense dreaming, under the influence of life's grandest illusion or "maya" as it is termed in Sanskrit. Just as we dream at night, or even during a particularly exciting part of the day, that we are someone else, somewhere else doing something else, Advaita suggests we are dreaming now. Dreaming we are a fairly small individual, entirely separate and isolated from everything and everybody else, when in fact we are entirely connected, related and integrated with every other creature, atom and element in this grand cosmos. The world of duality is said to be a superimposition upon the nondual Brahman, and the Indians being wonderfully extravagant story tellers have some equally rich analogies for 'maya' the 'illusion' of duality where there is none, constantly saying it is like walking down a path and coming across what appears to be a snake on the road, only to realize once the fear has subsided that it is in fact a bit of rope, or for an even magical analogy Gaudapada in Karika 2.31, states that this universe is seen;

"like a dream and magic are seen, and just as a mirage city is seen in the sky, so is this universe seen by those who are well-versed in the Vedanta."

A famous Zen story also illustrates the point, but also leaves us with a question of which state is 'real' if a distinction can be made in that way at all?

“Once Chuang-Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang-Chou. Suddenly he awoke and there he was, solid and unmistakably Chuang-Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang-Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang-Chou. Between Chuang-Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction!”

Advaita Vedanta suggests that the experience of duality is neither absolutely real nor absolutely non-existent, but is the continual play of Brahman, hiding itself within itself.

“The Self, the effulgent one, apparently creates itself through itself due to its own maya. It is just the Self who knows the objects.”
(Gaudapada's Karika 2.12)

Our experience of duality is said to be real in the sense that the variety, multiplicity and apparent differences of experience are definitely existent, however their existence is based upon one nondual reality and cannot be truly separated from that primal existence except by the limiting and dualistic processes of the mind.

5: Brahman as Sat, Chit, and Ananda.

In absolute terms Brahman is often referred to as Sat (Existence or truth), Chit (Consciousness), Ananda (Bliss) or, as the Taittiriya Upanishad states, it is “Being, Awareness, Limitless” (Gupta.1995: Pg 15). These absolutes are never thought of as existing side by side but as several names of the same thing, “much like Frege's ‘the morning star is the evening star.’ The morning star and the evening star have the same referent but different meanings.” (Gupta.1995: Pg 105)

Consciousness is used extensively in reference to Brahman. Both in the absolute sense of limitless Consciousness, and relative sense of pure awareness or the eternal knower who watches all the many forms of knowledge and the objects of knowledge. From the relative perspective it is expressed as the eternal thread untouched by phenomena, a thread used to negate and detach from the duality arising in mind. In Robert Forman's article, "What Does Mysticism Have to Teach Us about Consciousness?" (*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 5, 2, 1998, 185-201) he describes this as the "dual mystical state" where formless consciousness is present simultaneously with objects and its final dissolution in the “unitive mystical state” where subject and object are one or nondual. The process of negating, or detaching one's attachment from whatever arises in one's perception is one of the key practices of Advaita, ‘neti, neti’, ‘not this not this’, the sense being that one is not ‘limited’ by the thoughts that arise in mind, not the feelings in the heart or the sensations of the body, but that one's sense of self is founded on the pure witnessing consciousness, untouched by any objects of awareness. When there is a full sense of freedom from these objects (not that they disappear, but that they do not define and limit one's sense of being in the slightest) the awareness seems to expand, become heightened and seems to be completely blissful, in and of its self, for no reason other than that seems to be a part of its very nature, infinite and blissful. But as Robert Forman suggests this state is a ‘dual mystical state’, there is awareness on one side and objects of awareness on the other, with a profound sense of love between the two, but still a sense that ‘I’ am the awareness and not the objects that arise within it. However if this is pushed through, if that is the right word? The ‘unitive mystical state’ as he calls it can be experienced, if the ‘I’ is completely dissolved, no location for awareness remaining, no subject to watch the movie, things are then ‘seen’ (although the word, with its inherent duality, doesn't really work in this context) as

completely nondual, spontaneous manifestations of the an undivided field of Being, matter as mind, mind as matter, consciousness shimmering in the form and formless. In the Digha Nikaya the Buddha describes that in this state of 'Nirvana' "there is this consciousness, without a distinguishing mark, infinite and shining everywhere." Here one gets a sense of why Brahman has both the quality of ever expanding but also eternal and unchanging, and also why words fall short of this "thunderous silence".

6: The "Hard Problem" of Consciousness.

Now having had a taste, either momentary or stable and apparently continual, of this nondual state of being, the mystics and philosophers of Advaita attempted and do attempt, in endless ways, to explain rationally how this universe could in fact be thoroughly nondual, from discussing Brahman as the cause of the world and analyzing the three states of experience (waking, dream and deep sleep), to discussing levels of consciousness. Contemporary exponents of non-duality contribute to scientific debate and work towards creating a theoretical structure of the Cosmos that includes both traditional contemplative wisdom and current scientific thinking, based upon a nondual foundation.

At the heart of the problem is the eternal mind-matter problem, neuroscience's "hard problem" of "how consciousness arises from the seemingly objective, material world", a question that has plagued Vedanta for a few thousand years. While neuroscience is coming to the conclusion that;

"Perhaps 'conscious mental fields' arise from neuronal activity in the same way that magnetic fields arise from electric currents in a wire." (Pauen, 2004:Pg 43)

Contemporary exponents of non-duality like Ken Wilber suggest that consciousness "cannot be completely derived from, or reduced to, something else", rather the two, "'subjective experience' and 'objective matter/energy' arise correlatively from the very start," (Wilber, 2000.B) and are an integral part of the fabric of the universe. Along these lines Chalmers states in "Moving Forward on the Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 4, 1, 1997, that; "One is forced to the conclusion that no reductive explanation of consciousness can be given" and that "(proto) experiential properties constitute the intrinsic nature of physical reality." (Wilber, 2000.B) Here we have the traditional exposition of Consciousness, a twofold aspect of the universe, the play of matter and the eternal consciousness, or Being and Becoming as Plato states, and if the view becomes established as valid it suggests a link between the 'felt' experience of mystics and the objective structure of the universe. An interesting question that then would come from this is how knowledge that arises within contemplative states can be used to aid in the development of scientific or cultural forms of knowledge, if they can at all?

7: The Hierarchy of Being.

But I digress, back to our first question, how does traditional Advaita Vedanta suggest we can reconcile what it defines as 'absolute', 'nondual' experience and 'relative', and 'dual' experience? Within the relative perspective Vedanta tries to resolve the duality of experience by putting forward a hierarchy of reality. Discussed in many traditional philosophies, it has of course taken a grand beating in recent times, but never the less, being a world view that appears in virtually every civilization in some form or other, perhaps it has some degree of truth to it.

Traditionally Advaita Vedanta describes four basic levels of reality, reflected in both the macrocosm and microcosm. It is often described in different ways but the fourfold structure is the most basic expressed throughout many traditions as seen above. In the Cosmos this is seen as the physical world, subtle, causal and Nirguna (Nir - without qualities - guna) Brahman, the nondual ground of the other three. Each greater structure transcends and includes the others, in infinite shades from quark, atom, cell and molecule up to Brahman itself. (Wilber.2000.A: Pg 1-20 & 63-72)

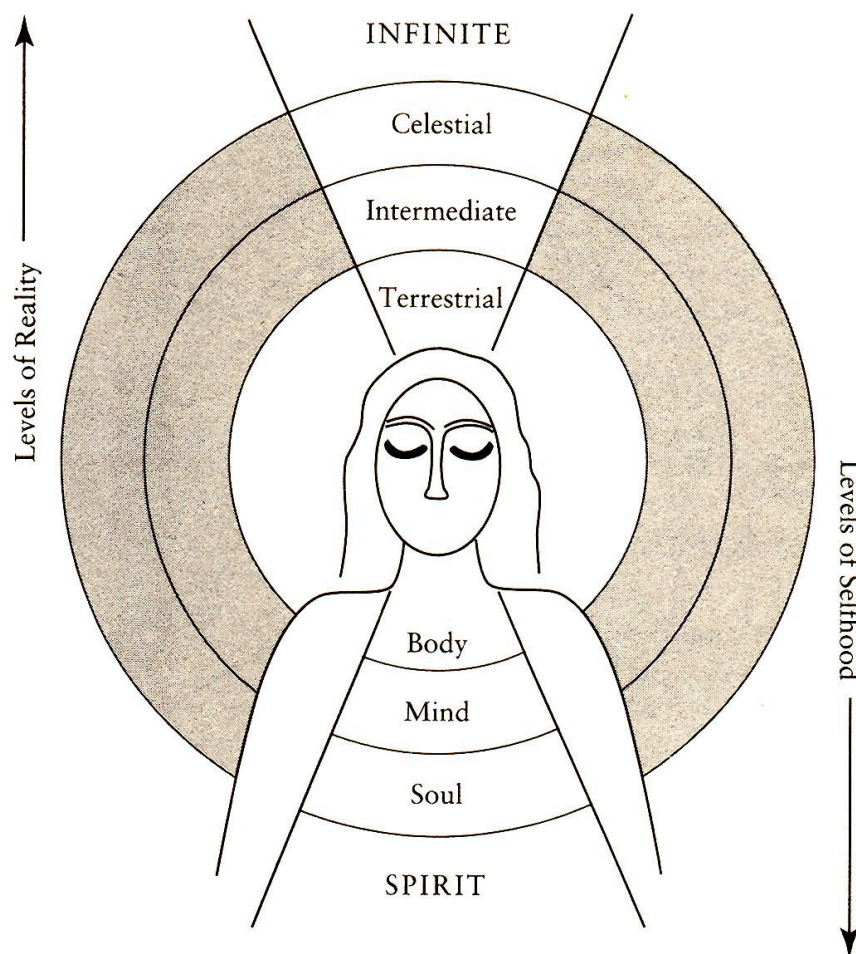


Figure 4-1. *The Great Nest of Being*. Adapted by permission from Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, p. 62)

Within the individual these four structures, if the last one can really be called a 'structure' at all, are experienced as individual levels of consciousness. These structures support the individual sense of self and "... in themselves they appear to be devoid of an inherent self-sense, and therefore the self can *identify* with any of them... That is, one of the primary characteristics of the self seems to be its capacity to *identify* with the basic structures or levels of consciousness, and every time it does so, according to this view, it generates a specific type of self-identity, with specific needs and drives." (Wilber. 2000.B)

Within the mental, subtle and causal levels of consciousness are some of the meditative stages mentioned previously as well as the conventional stages of psychological growth. As Ken Wilber states the individual at each level exhibits a different worldview and different subject-object relationship, this relationship becoming finer and finer as the 'self' transcends each structure until the distinction is eventually seen to be unreal. Robert Forman describes the shift in experience; "Their discriminating feature is a deep shift in epistemological structure: the experienced relationship between the self and one's perceptual objects changes profoundly." (Wilber. 2004)

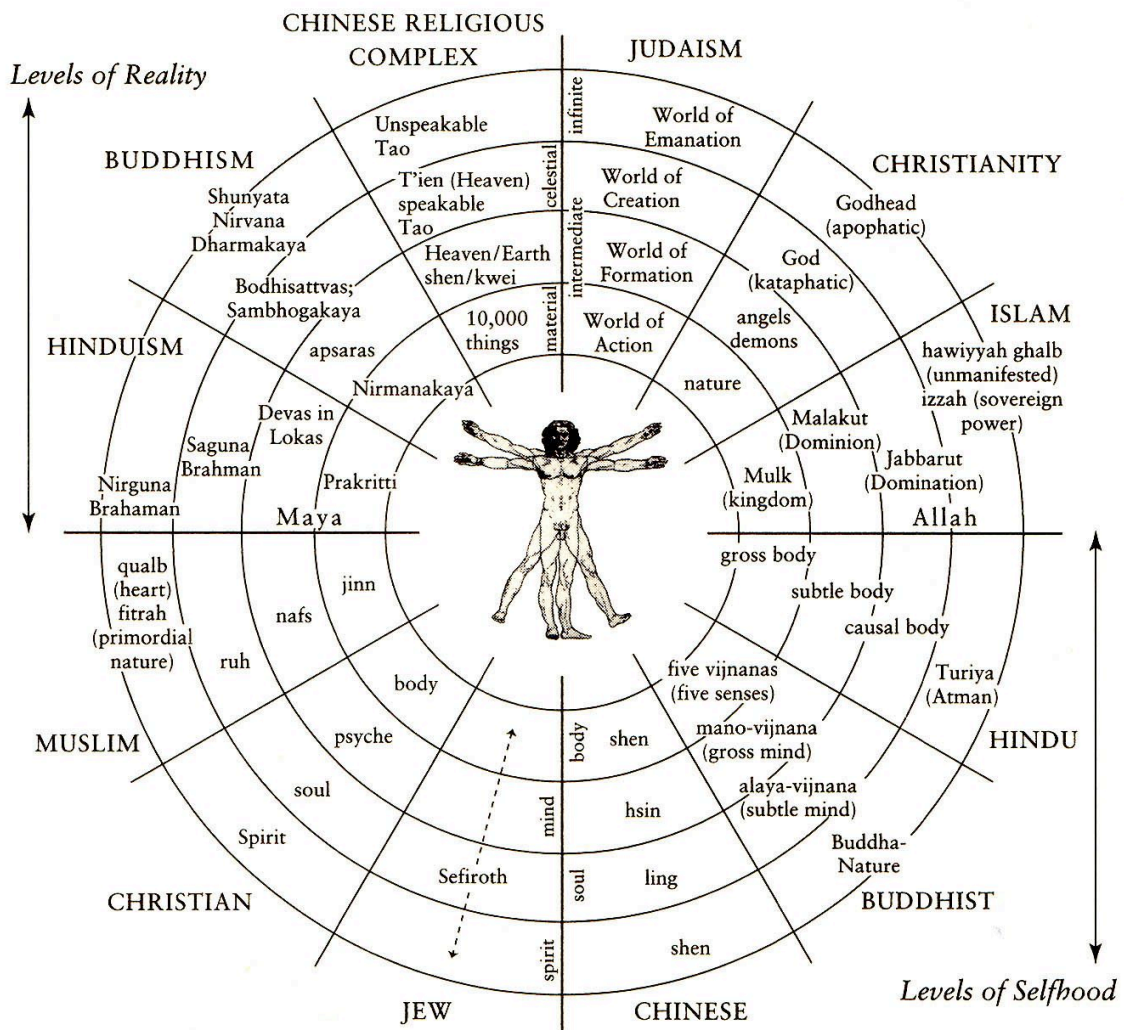


Figure 4-2. The Great Nest in Various Traditions.
Graphic layout courtesy of Brad Reynolds.

8: The Two Natures Of The Individual - Aham & Ahankara.

Within the nature of the individual Advaita Vedanta makes a distinction, just as a distinction has been made in knowledge. On one hand there is the individual's essential nature identical with Brahman, commonly referred to as pure Consciousness or as the pure sense of "I am" ness (Aham). On the other hand is the 'self', the individual personality. The 'self' is described as a limiting adjunct (upadhi) upon the undivided nature of Consciousness. Thus within the individual, pure Consciousness or the sense of I Am-ness (Aham) is co-joined and limited to some form in the world; therefore you have Ahankara (I Am (Aham) + Creation/world (kara) = I am a human, I am dumb, etc.). This sense of individuality relies upon the superimposition of various thoughts, objects and perceptions, onto pure Consciousness. However when deconstructed and negated, as in meditative practice, the real nature immediately manifests itself, as Shankara states;

"the difference between the individual self and the unconditioned Self is not absolutely real, it is brought about by limiting adjuncts such as the physical body etc., which are composed of name-and-form and which are presented by ignorance."

Thus the crux of Advaita is not only the realization that the limited "self" is ultimately unreal, but that the sense of personal identity, the 'ego' is in fact primarily based upon the constant and continual sense of Consciousness which we all feel in its many varied forms and expressions at all times. Advaita maintains that this Consciousness is self-luminous, only revealing itself fully as limitless and blissful when stripped of all other limiting mental adjuncts. (Comans.2000: Pg 231-237) Personally I find this one of the most interesting aspects of Advaita Vedanta, it seems to provide an accessible and relevant point of departure, profoundly addressing that fundamental question, what or who am I? And suggesting a thread to be followed between two apparently contradictory states of being, dual and nondual, individual and universal.

9: The Hierarchy of Being in Culture.

One of the interesting things for art & culture regarding the hierarchy of Being. Is that forms whether they be mental or physical, reflect different levels of Consciousness. Thus art and culture could be seen as manifestations of the 'self' moving through the continually unfolding levels of Consciousness. In these terms cultural and individual development, as Ken Wilber says, "is indeed a decline in egocentrism. Each developmental wave is a decrease in narcissism and an increase in consciousness (or an increase in the capacity to take deeper and wider perspectives into account)." Wilber, K. (2000.B) Thus when analyzing art and culture especially in its wider context, Advaita Vedanta puts forward a framework within which to position these varied forms.

Similar to the research into meditation (and its various stages), effects on the brain and the cross-cultural applicability of these structures, an interesting scientific undertaking would be to test whether these levels of Consciousness (assuming it is established that they exist, and I think it is fairly well established that meditation can have a substantial impact on the brain's activities), have any tangible effect on the creation of physical forms.

10: The Unspeakable Tao - Positive & Negative Language.

The final point I would like to explore very briefly is how Advaita Vedanta uses language. If as Advaita states, non-duality cannot be fully understood by the senses, "It is not comprehended through the eye." (Mundaka Upanishad: 3.1.8) mind; "From which words turn back, not reaching,

along with the mind.” (Taittiriya Upanishad: 2.9.1) Or by the use of language, which is always bound to express things in terms of objects, then what place does language or any cultural form have in expressing non-duality let alone facilitating an experience of it? As it obviously does have a place or the continual and rich exposition of Advaita would be meaningless.

Advaita generally refers to Brahman through a particular type of language, either in the negative form, denying any limits on Brahman, in a positive form, affirming the various qualities of Brahman or in some secondary or implied meaning. Language negating all objects is often used;

“That which is invisible, ungraspable, without source, without features, without eyes or ears, hands or feet.” (Mundaka Upanishad: 1.1.6)
And there is the famous negation, “not this, not this”, which is also used somewhat like a mantra or koan to detach the mind from all objects of attachment and reveal the underlying ground of Being. ‘the description [of Brahman]: ‘Not this, not this.’ ... there is no more appropriate description than this: ‘not this.’” (Brihaduranyaka Upanishad: 2.3.6)

Generally within Advaita both positive and negative descriptions of Brahman are used together, one after the other; one hinting at what is inexpressible, the other negating what is transient, and as part of one process leading to a state of mind essentially beyond mental concepts. (Comans.2000: Pg 284-89) The negative form of language reflecting the contemplative process mentioned earlier where the thread of ‘witnessing consciousness’ is stripped experientially of any limits, as the Christians call it, the ‘via negativa’, the negative path to God, a denial that any finite conception can be given to God. Being a fundamentally nondual philosophy negative statements are never isolated from positive affirmations about Brahman and the nature of the self, such as the Chandogya Upanishad stating that:

“This little space within the lotus of the heart is as great as this vast universe. The heavens and the earth are there, the sun, moon & stars, wind, fire & lightning. All that now is, and all that is not. For the whole universe dwells within the lotus of the heart.”

The combination of both negative and positive language work beautifully in accord and reflect the contemplative process with its twofold aspect, 1: transcending any limitations on one’s own full experience of consciousness and 2: including and affirming all this, everything that arises in consciousness as consciousness itself, one’s very own self. Together, singing out like the famous Zen ‘Prajna Paramita Sutra’, “Form is only Emptiness, Emptiness is only Form, Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is no other than form.”

In conclusion I have tried to summarize some of the fundamental tenets of Advaita Vedanta, a philosophy that seems to be at complete odds to one’s normal experience of life and who one thinks one is. I normally look around and see these words, this computer and you, the reader, or anyone else that happens to pass before my eyes, as separate from me, Jonah Cacioppe, but occasionally, when I least expect it, it seems as if the whole world opens up, as I am sure it does to most people on those odd and wonderful occasions, and the brilliant radiance of one’s own original face shines forth, in everything, limitless and undivided. “One in All. All in One.” And all this jabbering makes perfect yet pointless sense.

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