

Knowledge before printing and after

– A view of the Advaita tradition

Traditional and modern attitudes

At the end of the twentieth century, India is a curious mixture of the modern and the medieval. On the one hand, there are modern institutes and industries, ranging up to the latest in information technology. On the other hand, most people are still greatly influenced by a remaining medieval tradition, of ritual belief and scholastic learning, which is still kept alive by active cults of faithful devotion and personal pilgrimage.

From India, a growing middle class looks to the West for the latest in modernity. From the West, there is a similarly faddish tendency: to look back at India – and other such places – for the latest in how to run away, from modern reason and individuality.

There is a simple reason for this curious situation. For the last hundred and fifty years, India has been going through a revolutionary change: from a traditional to a modern way of looking at the world. In essence, this is a more rapid version of the same process that has been going on in Europe and the West, through five hundred and fifty years of social and cultural upheaval.

We can think of this process as a sort of cultural modernization. Technologically, it starts with the use of printing and goes on through other media like radio, cinema, television and most recently computers and the internet. But the change is far more than technological. More radically, it involves a kind of about turn, in our way of learning things.

In traditional societies, before the use of printing, knowledge was learned in a rather formal and authoritarian way, from parents and elders. The attitude was: ‘First do and think as you are told, in order to learn the traditional forms. Then, in the course of time, through faith and obedience towards these hallowed forms, you will eventually come to learn what they are all about.’

In the modern world, such an attitude of unquestioning faith is no longer appropriate. We are no longer restricted to a few, hallowed forms of culture, handed down by parents and elders in small traditional communities. Instead, we have a far greater variety of choice: through books, news-

papers, magazines, radio, movies, TV, computers, telephones, and through meeting people who travel by car or bus or train or plane between different parts of the world.

Given this variety of modern choice, a person today needs a far more questioning and independent-minded attitude than was traditionally appropriate. And such independent questioning needs to start at a much earlier stage in the process of learning and education. Where the old approach had a tendency to tell people what to do and what to think, the emphasis has now shifted: towards doing things and thinking for oneself.

As a result, when we look at traditional learning, it is expressed in an unfamiliar way that strikes us as closed and didactic, in contrast with the more open and democratic way that we prefer today. The traditional manner of expression is a kind of barrier that we have to get past, as we try to interpret old systems of knowledge that come down to us from ancient and medieval times.

This talk is centred upon a system of philosophy called ‘Advaita Vedānta’. For short, it may be called just ‘Advaita’. It is an ancient tradition, which comes down to us through the Upanishads, some of which were composed over two and a half thousand years ago. And it is a living tradition today, as one of the fundamental systems at the centre of modern Hinduism. Unfortunately, it is all too often expressed in a mystical and authoritarian manner that still hangs over from its recently medieval past. So the question arises of how it might be interpreted in a more modern way.

In order to understand this question a little better, it may help to consider the traditional system of education that was prevalent in India till the late nineteenth century. It wasn’t till then that printed books began to be widely available in Indian languages. So it was only then that modern schools and print-based curricula could start developing, to a significant extent. And even after modern schools were started, the traditional system continued alongside – with many children still being traditionally educated – until the middle of the twentieth century.

Without the modern communications on which we depend so much, without even books being freely available, how did people learn things and become educated in traditional society? The answer is simple. People learned largely by direct personal contact; and traditional culture was organized so that it could be carried on directly, from person to person.

This had a far-reaching effect on traditional attitudes. In the first place,

it meant that each community had to make do with a relatively few forms, which could be personally transmitted and reproduced. The reproduction and transmission of form had to be much more of a personal matter than it is today. People had to spend much more time and effort personally ensuring that the details of form were correctly maintained. Naturally, this meant that fewer forms could be kept available; and those forms that were available had to be used far more intensively than we are accustomed to today. In sum, traditional culture was organized to be *formal and intensive* in character, where modern culture is *informal and extensive*.

Even before the start of educational lessons, a child had an intimate background in traditional formality; because every area of life was organized by reproducing the traditional forms. In particular, practical life was regulated by observing the forms of custom and convention; intellectual life was developed by repeating the sayings of folklore and the verses or aphorisms of didactic texts; and emotional life was cultivated by performing the ceremonies of society and the rituals of religion.

From this formal intensity, there resulted a second traditional attitude: of *repetition and concentration*. Since the forms of tradition were relatively few, they had to be used more often. So people learned to concentrate on the same few forms over and over again, learning gradually more through successive repetitions.

Traditional arts and crafts were based on a repetition of the same few motifs, patterns and themes. Traditional stories, in particular from epic and religious legend, were retold and dramatized so often that their characters and events were a lifelong, deeply felt part of people's lives. Traditional training consisted in a repetition of formal exercises; traditional behaviour and attitudes were regulated by forms of custom and ceremony that had to be observed over and over again; and a traditional person's life was organized by the repetition of daily routine, with special periods of time set apart for concentrated practice and study and worship.

From such repeated concentration, there resulted a third traditional attitude: of *obedience and faith*. Since traditional forms were so concentrated, they were not meant to achieve results or to be understood at once. Instead, they were designed to be obediently performed and faithfully repeated many, many times, under the guidance of an experienced teacher. The process clearly required a patient spirit of acceptance and belief: on the one hand in classical culture, with its special systems of rigorous train-

ing; and on the other hand in the folk culture of tightly-knit communities that threatened to ostracize those who did not conform to the accepted norms of custom and convention.

And finally, from the necessity for obedient faith, there resulted a fourth traditional attitude: of *respect and reverence*. In particular, since traditional forms and teachers had to be followed and obeyed with such faithful attention, they had to be highly respected: as representatives of the concentrated wisdom that had accumulated in the course of long-established tradition.

More generally, since traditional society lacked the technological capacity to provide individual opportunity for more than a very few people, it was authoritarian and hierarchical. It cultivated an attitude of respect for established forms and for elevated persons, as embodiments of status and value. Respect was cultivated practically by disciplined obedience, symbolically by ceremonial and ritual deference, and personally by ideals of devotion towards elders and superiors who provided direction and support.

Learning by heart¹

Against this general background, of traditional circumstance and attitudes, a child would begin to receive a literate education. Since books were scarce and cumbersome, the method of learning was largely oral. It was mainly learning by heart: through recitation and remembering.

First, there was usually a primary education, teaching a child to recite and to read and write in the commonly spoken vernacular language. A pupil would first learn to chant the alphabet; then to write it with a finger in spread-out sand, and to scratch it with a metal stylus onto a palm leaf, or to make some other such cumbersome written record. The next stage of lessons would be to recite songs and verses. They would sometimes be written down, both for practice at writing and for future reference; but mainly a pupil would keep reciting them till they were learned thoroughly by heart.

Much of what was recited would not at first be understood, because the literary language of verse was somewhat different from ordinary conversation. Instead of trying to understand, the pupils would concentrate on

¹The account here is taken specifically from Kerala state, as documented in Ananda Wood, *Knowledge before printing and after – The Indian tradition in changing Kerala*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1985.

correctly chanting the syllables, without worrying too much about the meaning. But many of the verses would remain in memory for a long time, and they would often be heard again; so that the meaning would eventually dawn and get thought about, perhaps at some later stage of life.

A primary student would thus learn some religious praises in worship of various deities; and also some didactic verses on time and calendar reckoning, on casting simple horoscopes, on simple arithmetic, and on some other elementary techniques through which day to day affairs were conducted.

This primary education lasted a couple of years, and it was relatively widespread. A further intellectual education was confined to brahmins and noblemen and to some others who were specially interested in learning. It required the study of a classical language, which for Hindus was mainly Sanskrit.

After learning the Sanskrit alphabet, a student would start memorizing an entire dictionary, called 'Amara-kosha'. It was a pretty exhaustive list of Sanskrit words, with synonyms listed together, as in a thesaurus. When first learned, this dictionary was just an enormous list of words, most of which were unfamiliar. So learning it by heart was quite a feat of repeated reciting and memorizing, which took more than a year of concentrated study. At this stage, there was no explanation of meaning. Just rhythmically organized chanting, arranged in verse form, to help fix the lists of synonyms into memory. In these lists, the occasional word might be familiar, because it occurred in the commonly spoken vernacular; and so it would later help the student to understand the meaning of the synonyms that were listed along with it.

After memorizing the dictionary, the student would go on to a grammar, which was also composed in rhythmic verse. It gave the conjugations and declensions of the various classes of Sanskrit words. Because of the regular patterns of grammar, this was easier to learn than the dictionary. It took only a few months of recitation and repetition.

After the dictionary and the grammar, a student could go on to a study of simple Sanskrit verse. The teacher would recite a verse, and the students would repeat it. Then there was an exercise of formal analysis, all by oral recitation.

First, the continuous series of syllables would be split up into words, and here the memorized dictionary would be of use. Next, the conjugation and declension of each word would be identified, using the grammar

that had been memorized. After that, the case-endings of each word would be changed to equivalent case-endings from the student's own vernacular. Next, the Sanskrit words would be substituted by more familiar vernacular words, so that a formal translation would be achieved.

Finally, the teacher would explain and illustrate the meaning of the verse. Here, at last, the formality would relax a little. The teacher's explanation was called 'sāra' or 'essence'. It was the enjoyable part of the instruction: the students' reward of understanding, for all the formalities that had been laboured through.

For homework outside class, the students would have to go on repeating the verse and the formal analysis, and they would also think about the teacher's explanation; so as to fix the verse in memory and to understand its meaning thoroughly. In the course of a couple of years more, spent memorizing and analysing verses like this, the students would gradually learn to read Sanskrit verse on their own. Then they were ready for a study of higher Sanskrit literature and the traditional sciences.

The traditional sciences were called 'shāstras'. They were codified in highly systematic, but condensed texts: which were sometimes composed in verse and sometimes in aphoristic prose. Both verses and aphorisms were meant to be learned by heart and fixed in the memory for future reference. But memorization was only a technical preliminary. Through a sustained process of repetition, the meaning of the texts had to be questioned and deeply thought about, over and over again, guided by textual commentaries and person to person explanation.

From a narrowly modern point of view, we think of 'learning by heart' as a merely formal and unthinking memorization, which does not bother to question what has been slavishly memorized. But the same phrase, 'learning by heart', has a more basic meaning, which was essential to the traditional approach. It refers to a sustained process of thinking something over, so often and so thoroughly that knowledge goes down beneath the surface of intellectual thought, to a more deeply intuitive understanding that may be described by the word 'heart'.

Merely reading or reciting the texts was not enough. A scholar had to explain and interpret the quotations that were made. By thus using what was quoted to drive a point home, traditional scholars acquired their considerable status and power, as the teachers and counsellors of classical and medieval society. Beneath the authoritarian manner of traditional expression, reflective questions of interpretation and meaning were of course as fundamental in the past as they are today in the present.

Spiritual disciplines

Advaita philosophy was one of the traditional sciences. In Sanskrit, the word for philosophy is ‘tattva-shāstra’, which means the ‘science of truth’.

Advaita is a system of enquiry with only one aim. It looks for truth. And it takes this search to the furthest extreme. It looks for one hundred percent truth, unmixed with anything pretended or false.

In the normal course of life, what we usually take for truth has many compromises in it. It comes dressed up in our thoughts and desires, which contain an element of imagination and make-believe. This make-believe is a convenient pretence, a sort of white lie that we let pass and leave unexamined; while we are busy, going after the various things that we currently want.

But sometimes, we are not willing to accept any such compromise. We then want truth, plain and simple, without any dressing of make-believe. In the Advaita system, this search for truth is all-consuming. All experiences are treated as partial aspects, or as conditioned approaches, which lead towards an impartial and unconditioned truth that is their final goal.

Through the concept of ‘sat-cit-ānanda’, a distinction is made between three aspects of truth.

- The first aspect is ‘sat’ or ‘existence’. Here, truth is approached as the continuing basis of reality: which confronts our differing perceptions and our changing actions.
- The second aspect is ‘cit’ or ‘consciousness’. Here, truth is approached as the illuminating basis of knowledge: which lights our thoughts and perceptions, and enables us to examine what they show.
- The third aspect is ‘ānanda’ or ‘happiness’. Here, truth is approached as the motivating basis of value: which is expressed in our feelings, thoughts and acts.

In short, truth is conceived to be experienced in three ways: as true reality, true knowledge and true value. It is experienced as reality or existence, when encountered in action. But it is also experienced as knowledge or consciousness, when one looks for it through the questioning enquiry of thought. And it is further experienced as value or happiness or peace or love, when it gets expressed through feeling.

These three aspects gave rise to three different kinds of spiritual discipline, which were cultivated in the Advaita tradition. They were: first, the practical discipline of yoga; second, the philosophical enquiry of jnyāna; and third, the emotional surrender of bhakti.

Yoga: The discipline of yoga is a practical technology, which corresponds to the sat or existence aspect of truth. The word ‘yoga’ means ‘harnessing’ or ‘joining’. It comes from the same root as the English verb: ‘to yoke’. Accordingly, the discipline of yoga is meant to harness one’s faculties, through a long-term process of purifying one’s character, towards an ultimate union with pure truth.

In yoga, the faculties of mind are meant to be harnessed through the exercise of meditation. Here, it is neither intellectual meaning nor emotional value that is of primary importance. Instead, the mind’s attention is directed through some prescribed form of practice: like repeating a mantra, or visualizing an image, or watching experience pass by. Through the repeated practice of such a formal exercise, over and over again, a practitioner is meant to arrive at a specially altered state of mind, called a ‘samādhi’. Here, the mind is supposed to be expanded beyond its normal limitations, by detaching it from the usual distractions of ordinary experience. The result is a mystical state, where an advanced practitioner has special insights and intuitions that are not ordinarily accessible.

Thus yoga is a esoteric way to truth. It does not reason directly from common experience. Instead, it develops special states and powers of mind, which are confounding and inaccessible to common understanding. In this sense, it is a mystical technology, which developed in association with traditional magic and ritual. But, unlike magic and ritual, it is not meant to aim at any partial objective – neither physical nor mental – in the world that personality perceives. Its true aim is purely spiritual: to purify the mind towards an ultimate union, with impartial truth.

For a traditional Hindu, magic and ritual were powerful technologies; but they remained limited, by their worldly objectives. Yoga was the one ultimate technology: because it aims entirely within, beyond all the limitations of physical and mental things.

Jnyāna: However, the mystic states of yoga are useless in themselves. They are only passing states, which need some further enquiry, to show a truth that is common to all experience. Thus yoga is only a preparation: for the philosophical enquiry of jnyāna. And the preparation of yoga is not essential. In fact, yoga is an indirect way to truth; because philosophy does not have to enquire through mystical states of experience. For those who are willing to ask reflective questions, it is far more direct to reason – in an independent-minded way – from common experience.

The word ‘jnyāna’ means ‘knowledge’. When the word is used in a

worldly sense, it refers to knowledge of the partial objects that our perceptions see, our thoughts interpret and our feelings desire. But when the word 'jnyāna is used in a spiritual sense, it refers to a knowledge of impartial truth, beneath all perceived and thought and felt appearances. So the spiritual discipline of jnyāna is a skeptical enquiry that throws all beliefs and assumptions into question: thus turning attention back from the superficiality of outward things, towards the underlying basis of knowledge.

This skeptical questioning is the explicit centre of the Advaita tradition. It is the way of reason and independent-minded individuality: which leads directly to the cit or consciousness aspect of truth.

In traditional times, this skeptical questioning was deliberately covered up, behind an aura of strangeness and mystery. The problem was that traditional communities were organized through religious faith and belief. In ordinary life, open philosophical questioning was seen as a threat to social order. As a result, philosophy was usually kept away from ordinary people. For a traditional Hindu, it was the ultimate science, but it was dangerous. It had to be carefully guarded: in special, esoteric cults that were closed off from all but a few initiates, who alone were eligible for it.

Bhakti: In their turn, the explicit questions of philosophy are meaningless, without an underlying love for truth. It is through love that dry ideas and questions come alive, and lead to clearer truth. Thus, philosophical enquiry is only an explicit manifestation: in the growth and deepening of love. Where the questioning is genuine, it joins – through its inherent nature – into the way of bhakti or devotion: which corresponds to the ānanda or happiness aspect of truth.

In traditional society, devotion was cultivated through religious worship. This was the popular kind of devotion, accessible to everyone. Through a prescribed faith and belief, the form of a deity would be imagined, in a way that was personally appealing to a worshipper. In Hinduism, such a personally appealing form of God is called an 'ishṭa-mūrti', which means an 'embodiment of liking and desire'.

Thus, religion was approached through personal feeling; though the final aim of worship was to surrender all personal desire to the worshipped deity, who represented an ultimate principle of value and truth. Through the constant attentions of worship, a devotee's love was meant to grow towards a final state of fulfilment in which everything would be seen as

an expression of the ultimate. Then, no matter what was done, nor where attention was directed, the devotee would always see the all-pervading goodness and truth that was symbolized by the deity's form.

In the Advaita tradition, religious worship was considered a potentially useful preparation, but a dispensable one: just like the practice of yoga. From a philosophical point of view, religious worship is artificial, because it is based on beliefs that have been taken for granted. In philosophy, there is a progressive deepening of love, but it cannot finally depend on any beliefs that must be thrown into question. So love must deepen naturally and spontaneously, in the course of clarifying truth.

That love is expressed in the relationship between teacher and disciple. For a disciple, the teacher stands for truth that has been taught. So love for truth gets naturally expressed in a spiritual devotion towards the teacher. But this is a very delicate matter of sensibility, where an impersonal truth is seen expressed in the person of a teacher. Such a spiritual devotion must rise unforced and unpretended, of its own accord. It must be felt from an impersonal depth of being: from far beneath all words and thoughts, and all their spoken and conceived intentions.

Classical, medieval and modern

Like other systems of Hindu philosophy, the Advaita tradition looks back to the Upanishads as its founding texts. They are ancient texts, expressed in a highly condensed way: which leaves them rather open to interpretation and explanation. Their teaching is centred upon a number of short and very concentrated statements: which were not meant to be written and read, but instead to be chanted and heard.

A teacher would recite such a statement and explain what it meant. Since the disciples were trained in memorization, they wouldn't need to pay much attention to the business of reciting and remembering. Their attention was meant to be fixed on listening and understanding.

Later on, a disciple would keep repeating the statement and reflecting upon it. Mechanical repetition was not enough. Here too, the disciple was required to listen, by reflecting upon the words and getting back to what they meant. Thus the statements of the Upanishads have two aspects:

- The first aspect is called 'mantra', which means 'device' or 'design'. Here, the shape of sound in the chanted words has an effect upon mood, in much the same way that music does. As attention keeps being con-

centrated through these shapes of chanted sound, the mind is thrown into special states of samādhi, where intuitive powers and perceptions are supposed to get expanded to an extraordinary degree. The mantra aspect is thus associated with the discipline of yoga or mystic meditation.

- The second aspect is called ‘vicāra’, which means ‘thought’ or ‘enquiry’. Here, the mind reflects back to its own basis of understanding, beneath all physical and mental shapes of sound. The physical and mental sounds are heard at the limited surface of the mind’s attention. The questioning thought of vicāra is not concerned with the shape of spoken sounds, but with their meaning. Here, thought looks back into meaning, thus reasoning its way towards the underlying ground of understanding. This vicāra aspect is nothing but the reflective reason of philosophy.

In the Advaita tradition, the mantra aspect is peripheral, for it is concerned with the personal development of mystic states and faculties. The vicāra aspect is central: as a reflective enquiry into pure, impersonal knowledge. And the enquiry is meant to be taken to its furthest extreme. By questioning back into the foundations of knowledge, at the depth of one’s own experience, one is meant to reach a final ground of all reality, which extends throughout the universe.

At that final ground, one has returned to pure being: to plain, uncompromised reality. Then it turns out that there is no duality between what knows and what is known. There is no difference between the pure consciousness of knowing self and the complete reality of everything that’s known, at all times and places in the entire universe. ‘Consciousness’ and ‘reality’ are just two different words, which each describe the same, non-dual truth. That is what the word ‘advaita’ means. ‘A-’ is a Sanskrit prefix meaning ‘non-’, and ‘dvaita’ is the Sanskrit word for ‘duality’. So ‘advaita’ means ‘non-duality’.

Thus, the Advaita standpoint is an extreme individualism. It concludes, quite literally, that the individual is everything. But it must be understood that this is not a doctrinal axiom or a hypothetical assumption, on which some ideology or theory can be built. Instead it is a provocative statement of philosophical conclusion: meant to direct a reflective enquiry that asks its way back down, beneath all built-up superstructures, in search of clearer understanding.

By this conclusion of non-duality, between what knows and what is

known, our usual concepts of 'self' and 'individuality' are thrown into question. So also, our usual concepts of 'consciousness' and 'reality'.

If one's own self is identical with all reality, then one's true individuality cannot be personal. As the word 'individual' implies, one's true individuality must be quite indivisible within itself. And with regard to other things, it must be utterly unique, with nothing else existing apart from it.

But what could be this undivided and unique individuality, on which all things depend? The Advaita tradition concludes that it is 'pure consciousness', at the impersonal depth of everyone's experience. But what then is this consciousness, unmixed with any personal faculties of body or of mind?

And if reality is nothing else but consciousness, then what are all the living and non-living things we see, in a vast universe where we observe so much outside our little bodies and our narrow minds?

Thus, if the conclusions of Advaita are taken seriously, they tend to raise a storm of puzzling questions. The Upanishads state some of the conclusions in a rather bare and terse way, without providing much by way of systematic explanation.

After the Upanishads, there followed a classical period of Indian civilization: in which treatises and commentaries were written, and the classic schools of philosophy were formed. Advaita Vedānta was one of these. Around the eighth and ninth centuries A.D., it was put into its classic form by Shri Shankara and his followers. They interpreted and explained the Upanishads in a scholastic system that was suited to their times; and they established a number of ascetic orders, which helped the tradition through the long medieval period that followed afterwards.

In the medieval period, through decadence and conquest by foreign invaders, there was a marked tendency for Hindus to turn away from the world, into ascetic and religious cults. Yogic practice and scholastic learning were maintained in ascetic orders of sannyāsis and in scholarly families of brahmins and noblemen. Throughout society, there was a popular development of devotional religion: as the abstractions of scholastic philosophy were metaphorically expressed, through more concrete forms of religious worship and imagination.

All over India, religious saints led widespread devotional cults, fervently calling on ordinary people to turn away from the miseries of a troubled world and to give their hearts to God. These saints sang popular songs of devotion and spoke to people in their own vernacular languages.

The great epics of classical literature were retold with new devotional fervour in various vernacular versions; thus founding the growth of vernacular literatures, which now rose from the level of folk tradition to start assimilating and developing the knowledge of classical learning.

Then, as the vernacular cultures were in the process of developing themselves on the model of classical systems, the rule of the British brought political stability, the growth of modern communications and an influx of new culture from the West. As a result, there has been a kind of renaissance in the Indian tradition, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Stimulated by the interest of scholars from the West, the Upanishads and other classics have begun to be studied through modern methods of scholarship; and the Advaita tradition has begun to express itself in modern terms. This modernization can be seen as a current reaffirmation of an old individualism, which has always been essential to the tradition.

By its essential nature, and by its own account, Advaita philosophy is not tied down to any organized religion, nor to any kind of academic or scholarly institution. In the end, it is not passed on through any complex organization, but only through the individuals who are taken to have realized its non-dual truth. Such an individual is called a 'jnyāni' or a 'sage'. Literally, the Sanskrit word 'jnyāni' means a 'knower'; but where an ultimate wisdom is implied, it is usually translated by the English word 'sage'.

One prominently recognized example of an Advaita sage is Rāmakrishṇa, who lived and taught in nineteenth century Bengal. In many ways, he represents a culmination of the medieval tradition. He was by temperament a fervent devotee, given to tremendous ecstasies. At the end of his spiritual search, he was instructed in Advaita Vedānta, by an ascetic from one of the Shankara orders.

His Advaita teacher told him that he must go beyond all the names and forms of God: in order to reach the final truth of ātman, the unconditioned self. But Rāmakrishṇa kept having visions of his personal goddess Kālī. Finally, his teacher picked up a sharp piece of glass and pressed its point between Rāmakrishṇa's eyebrows. 'Concentrate the mind at this point!' he said. Then Rāmakrishṇa had another vision, in which the divine form of Kālī appeared again. But this time, as he tells us, he used his discrimination as a sword to cut the form in two. And thus, according to his own account, he came to a non-dual realization, where no form at all appears.

After this realization, Rāmakrishṇa continued outwardly as a fervent

devotee of Kālī, whom he called the ‘Divine Mother’. But he went on to teach many disciples, who recognized that, inwardly, he was a jnyāni or an Advaita sage. His most famous disciple was Vivekānanda, who was very independent-minded and strongly inclined towards reason. After Rāmākriṣṇa passed away, Vivekānanda made a celebrated trip to the West; and along with his fellow disciples, he developed one of the first modern interpretations that explains Advaita from within.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the most prominently recognized jnyāni was Ramaṇa Maharshi, who lived and taught in South India. He is remembered for the question ‘Who am I?’: which he said people should ask for themselves, as the most direct way to realization. Failing that, he said, there was the indirect way of religious surrender. As he is reported to have put it himself: ‘One of two things must be done: either surrender yourself, because you realize your inability and need a Higher Power to help you; or investigate into the cause of misery, go into the Source and so merge in the Self.’²

However, it is a little odd to talk like this, about a publicly recognized jnyāni or sage. According to the Advaita tradition itself, public recognition is of little value. If one is genuinely interested in non-dual truth, no published books, nor any public institutions can be sufficient. One has to find a living teacher, whose teaching one must judge and investigate for oneself. That is as true today as it has always been.

Universal and individual

As Advaita modernizes itself, there is a change of emphasis: from a traditional approach of somewhat indirect preparation, to a more direct questioning.

In the traditional approach, there was a tendency to emphasize a prolonged preparation of personal character: through the mystical and ecstatic disciplines of yoga and religious devotion. Through these disciplines, a person’s character was meant to be purified from petty egotism, thus expanding the mind towards a cosmic consciousness of some mystical or divine universality.

This is a cosmological approach, represented by the concept of ‘brahman’: which comes from the root ‘brih’, meaning ‘to expand’. Philosophically used, the word ‘brahman’ refers to the complete expanse of all ex-

²From *Maharshi’s Gospel* (Book 1, chapter 7), Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, Tamilnadu, India.

istence, including everything. Through yoga, the totality of brahman is mystically approached: in specially altered states that turn attention away from the ordinary objects of limited sense and mind. For the attainment of these mystic states, an ascetic attitude is required: in order to turn away from the ordinary objects that we desire and enjoy.

In religious worship, the totality of brahman is approached by a surrender to God. And here again, an attitude of mystery and renunciation is required: so that the worshipped form of God may lead beyond the limited things of world, to an unlimited reality that is represented by the divine form.

This traditional emphasis, on mystery and asceticism, is not essential to Advaita philosophy. It does not properly belong to the philosophy itself, but to old ways of preparing for an eventual questioning of truth. It is the old ways of preparation that are mystical and ascetic, because their approach is cosmological.

The enquiry of Advaita is not cosmological. It is not aimed at putting our particular perceptions together, into some comprehensive picture or some cosmic vision of the universe. Any such universal vision is only an appearance, a seeming '*many in the one*'. What Advaita seeks is the one reality that is truly shown in all particular perceptions and pictures. The basic concern here is not with the '*many in the one*', but with the '*one in the many*'.³

This approach is essentially reflective and individual. It starts with the particular perceptions and pictures that currently appear, in one's own experience. And through a process of careful reasoning, it asks its way down, towards the depth of experience from which all one's perceptions, thoughts and feelings arise.

This is not a psychological investigation, of one's mind or mental personality. Instead, it is a philosophical enquiry that aims beneath all mental and personal appearances. The aim is to look for an impersonal depth of experience: which continues beneath all the changing appearances produced by one's faculties of body, sense and mind.

That impersonal depth is one's true individuality: the unique and indivisible core of one's own being, which remains present through all the changes and variations of personality and world. In Sanskrit, that inner core of being is called '*ātman*': one's '*inmost self*'. And it is also de-

³This characterization of Advaita as '*one in the many*' comes from a remark by Professor T.L.S. Sprigge, who described Shri Shankara's position in this way.

scribed as ‘kūṭa-stha’: the ‘highest standpoint’ of individuality, quite unaffected by all changes and uncertainties.

This goal of unaffected individuality is described in a stanza from the *Ashṭāvakra-samhitā*. Here is a somewhat free translation:

Release yourself from the delusion:

‘I am this apparent person
who has somehow come to be –
perceived outside or felt within.’

Thus, recognize yourself as that
true individuality
which stands above all seeming else:

as unconditioned consciousness,
unclouded by duality.

from
1.13

But this is only a traditional injunction, recorded in an old book. In actual practice, like any other genuine philosophy, Advaita demands that one faces things and asks questions for oneself. It is only thus that one comes to think and act independently, from a clear understanding at the individual core of being.

According to Advaita, that individual centre is our common origin. It’s there, and only there, that each of us is truly free. And there all petty personality dissolves, in an unconditioned truth beneath all change and difference.