

## Comparative Epistemology of Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism In India and East Asia

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### Abstract

*This study focuses on the epistemic frameworks of Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism from their origins in India to their transmission in East Asia. Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta posits a theory of non-dual reality which gives a path to the attainment of ultimate knowledge (brahma jnana) by textual evidence, argument, and direct experience of the unity of atman and Brahman. The rejection of intrinsic existence and the emphasis on dependent origination and non-essentialism via the theories of emptiness (sunyata) and consciousness-only (vijñaptimatra) are very marked in the teachings of Nagarjuna and Asanga, particularly in Mahayana Buddhism.*

*The paper examines the handling of epistemic instruments such as perception, inference and authoritative witness in the two traditions which are similar in procedure but distinct in their ontological and soteriological purposes. The study focuses on the reformulation of epistemological notions in East Asian countries such as China and Japan under the influence of Buddhist scholastic traditions such as Madhyamaka and Yogacara. In the regional knowledge and reality production the emphasis is on translation, intercultural discourse and philosophical adaptation.*

*The present study is an inquiry into the inter-Asian network of ideas between Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism, with special reference to their notions of ultimate reality and the way to obtain it. The comparative approach illuminates classical Indian epistemology and its continued impact on Asian philosophical traditions.*

### Keywords

*Epistemology, Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, Comparative Philosophy, Indian Philosophy, East Asian Philosophy, Non-dualism, Pramāṅa, Consciousness, Self (Ātman), Non-self (Anātmān), Brahman, Liberation (Mokca), Enlightenment (NirvāGa), Yogācāra, Madhyamaka*

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## **Introduction**

Indian Philosophy is the acquisition, verification and presentation of knowledge. In this diverse intellectual climate Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism provide distinct but complementary epistemologies. Both faiths stress the importance of ultimate truth and freedom but differ in their approach towards knowledge (jnana) and its sources and philosophical consequences. In the non-dualistic Advaita Vedanta philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya, Brahman is the sole ultimate reality. The epistemological perspective of the Upanishads is that of a hierarchy of knowledge (pramanas) viz., perception (pratyaksa), inference (anumana) and scriptural evidence (sabda). In Advaita the knowledge is to realize at once the identity of the individual self (atman) with Brahman, and to dispel ignorance (avidya) and bondage. However, Nagarjuna and Asanga criticize Mahayana epistemology based on emptiness (sunyata) and dependent origination. Mahayana theory denies any permanent, autonomous substance and is sceptical of the certainty of ontology. It stresses observation and inference but criticizes them by emphasizing their conventional and situational character. This paradigm is the knowledge of the voidness of all things – the stopping of suffering and the production of happiness. The two traditions are different yet both go beyond factual knowledge to a transformational understanding which is important for freedom. The epistemologies of abstraction are soteriological in character. This paper analyses the similarities and differences between classical formulations and transmission and reinterpretation in India and East Asia, especially in China and Japan. Indian Buddhist intellectual ideas were transferred to East Asia where they were translated, altered and reinterpreted. Epistemological principles like Yogacara were introduced into China by people like Xuanzang. They came into being in certain cultural and linguistic circumstances. Advaita Vedanta did not take the same route, although its conceptual links with East Asian Buddhist philosophy are helpful. This dissertation is a comparative study of Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism, in the inter-Asian philosophical perspective, to understand the role of epistemic assumptions in the shaping of reality, self and freedom. This research demonstrates both systems' aims to eliminate ignorance and to arrive at a dynamic knowledge, supporting Asian comparative epistemology.

## **Epistemology in Advaita Vedanta**

Advaita Vedanta is a school of Hindu philosophy that is non-dualistic. Jnana is the direct awareness of the self (Atman) and its oneness with the ultimate truth. Advaita says ignorance (avidya) is the cause of human suffering and bondage, since we identify with the body and mind, rather than the universal Self. The only actual

knowledge is this direct personal experience that Atman, or the inner Self, and Brahman, the Absolute and the infinite Truth, are one.

In Advaita Vedanta truth (satya) is described as absolute, everlasting and immutable. The world of experience, of plurality and change, is a relative or empirical reality (vyavaharika satya), real for practical purposes but illusory (maya) from the ultimate position. Brahman alone is the absolute truth (paramarthika satya). So, the truth of Advaita is non-dual (advaita, “not two”). Only Brahman is real, and all else is a fleeting apparition. Realization of oneness between Atman (Self) and Brahman (Ultimate Reality) Truth (Satya) is Brahman, the eternal, unchanging truth. The phenomenal world is relative. Absolute truth (Paramarthika satya) Only Brahman Empirical truth (Vyavaharika satya): the world of common life. Pratibhasika satya is illusory or seeming truth, as seeing a snake in a rope.

In traditional Indian philosophy, especially in the school of Advaita Vedanta, the main ways of acquiring legitimate knowledge (prama) are perception, inference and testimony perception: knowledge via the senses. It is knowledge of things as they seem to us, information which is instantaneous. Perception is seeing a tree, or hearing a piece of music. Advaita vedanta accepts the perception of the empirical world (vyavaharika satya) as a legitimate pramana, but the world of the senses is transitory and not the ultimate truth. Inference: Reasoned conclusion from known facts to new facts. Also, indirect observation of signals or markings (hetu) which point to something not immediately visible. Smoke on a hill and believing it is fire. If they are not directly accessible to the senses, then inference is necessary for philosophical reasoning and supporting ideas. Agama (Testimony). Testimony is information derived from reputable verbal sources, such as the Vedas and Upanishads, or from trusted instructors. The greatest known metaphysical facts of Advaita Vedanta, such the nature of Brahman which cannot be understood via senses or inference, are discovered by using scripture evidence. The deepest spiritual understanding is found in the Upanishads.

### **Critiques of Other Epistemological Systems in Advaita Vedanta**

Being a major school of Indian philosophy, Advaita Vedanta critically engages with Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Buddhism and Mimamsa. Advaita is critical of knowledge (pramana) and ultimate reality. Pramana Nyaya and other schools recognize the plurality of perception, inference, comparison, postulation and non-cognition. To this Advaita replies that ultimate reality, Brahman, can be known only by perception, inference and scriptural testimony. They are either reducible to these three or are superfluous to spiritual insight (Deutsch 46). Non-Dualism Versus Realism. Nyaya and Vaisheshika are realist systems that hold that

the world and things exist irrespective of consciousness. Advaita states that only consciousness (Brahman) is real and the empirical world is an illusion (maya). Even the most reasonable knowledge of the universe does not reveal this non-dual truth and does not free (Hiriyanna 233). Dualism and Samkhya realities are Purusha (consciousness) and Prakriti (matter). According to Advaita, the reason for multiplicity is ignorance (avidya), and pure knowledge reveals the unity of all reality (Radhakrishnan 551). Buddhist Epistemology: Emptiness (shunyata) is stressed and objective reality denied by the Madhyamaka and Yogacara schools of Buddhism. Awareness and illusion are not grounded on emptiness in Advaita. Thus, in Advaita Brahman is affirmed as the positive, unchanging reality, the ground of all experience (Deutsch 52). Textual authority and Mimamsa: Mimamsa places the Vedas at the center for ritual and ethical knowledge, Advaita focuses on the Upanishads for metaphysical reality. Mimamsa ceremonial and restrictive, and insists that scriptural evidence should lead to realization of Brahman, not ritual practice (Radhakrishnan 582).

### **Epistemology in Buddhism**

In Mahayana Buddhism pramana (right cognition) is a proper cognition of reality. Philosophers such as Dignaga (480-540 CE) and Dharmakirti (600-660 CE) established pramana of Buddhist logic and epistemology. Mahayanist Buddhist logicians distinguish two forms of pramana: Pratyakca (Direct perception): It is the direct perception of colors, sounds, etc. Dignaga and Dharmakirti say that direct perception is the direct awareness of particulars as they are seen by consciousness without mistake or conceptual construction (kalpana). Anumâna: Inference, indirect understanding of ideas by signs or signs, one may conclude something not immediately obvious to the senses; like fire from smoke. That will need some study and discussion philosophically. Pramana is the intelligence of non-error, non-distortion. Pramana is the destruction of ignorance, the development of real knowledge. It is inherent to the development of Buddhism itself. Mahayana Buddhism makes the distinction between conventional truth (samvriti-satya) and ultimate truth (paramartha-satya). For the most part traditional, they may be useful for gaining insights into emptiness (shunyata) and ultimate truth. The most stable cognitions are not fundamentally characterized. This allows Mahayana thought to ground the notion of emptiness. To separate actual life and meditation true knowledge from opinion or illusion, valid cognition is necessary.

### **The Epistemology of Hinayana and Mahayana.**

There are two major schools of Buddhist philosophy (including epistemology): Hinayana (“Lesser Vehicle”, now often termed “Theravada”, a more polite name) and Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”); Hinayana/Theravada – Focus on

personal experience and the teachings of the historical Buddha. The world is seen mostly in terms of the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and Dependent Origination. Epistemology stresses the need of self-verification via meditation and ethics and a correct worldview. The Theravada Abhidharma literature speaks of consciousness and mental factors, but neither formal logic or a pramana theory are found. Mahayana: It elaborates several intricate epistemological and logical schools such as the Yogacara and Madhyamaka schools. The concept of pramana (valid cognition) was systematised by the philosophers Dignaga and Dharmakirti. They described correct cognition as perception (pratyaksha) and inference (anumana). Mahayana epistemology deals with conventional truths, ultimate reality and the concept of emptiness (shunyata). He argues and battles on philosophical subjects. He opposes wrong notions. It is a tremendous loss to the education of the Tibetan Buddhist monks. Hinayana/Theravada: Text (Words of the Buddha) and Perception. Stress on actual experience and facts and not on formal or logical reasoning. Logic is important, but it must never replace insight from meditation. Mahayana: Dignaga and Dharmakirti: perception and reasoning are the main pramanas. To ensure the appropriate understanding, formal argument and discussion are emphasized. The evidence is confirmed by reason and by analysis (Scriptural authority). Hinayana/Theravada the ultimate reality is nirvana, the end of desire and suffering. “Dharmas” (phenomenal elements) as a method of evaluating reality. Mahayana Ultimate truth is emptiness (everything is empty). Stress non-duality and the Buddha-nature of all sentient beings.

The greatest way to discover truth, according to Advaita Vedanta and many Buddhist traditions, is by direct experience and intuition. Utility is born by reasoning, the study of scripture, and philosophical discussion. Real knowledge (jnana in advaita, prajna in buddhism) is to be experienced. Advaita Vedanta: Brahman in Advaita Vedanta, they say, is beyond words, reason and concepts. The direct intuitive perception (aparoksha anubhuti) is freedom realized and hence the Upanishads say “Brahman is to be known not by logic but by direct experience” (Mundaka 2.4.3). This knowledge annihilates the difference between the knower, the known and the knowing and one knows one’s unity with Brahman (Deutsch 65). Zen and Mahayana Buddhism Enlightenment is direct experience (pratyaksha) and intuitive comprehension (prajna) The mind is trained by Scripture and meditation, but insight (satori or kensho in Zen) is spontaneous and immediate in human experience, beyond rational explanation (Suzuki 41). Don’t listen to what you are told. “And then you try it for yourself and you see. Kalama Sutta. We must comprehend on the intellectual plane, but ultimately, we are seeking the real fulfillment. Words and conceptions

may be connected to reality but they do not take the place of genuine experience. Actual knowledge may be obtained via meditation, introspection and self-examination.

### **Comparative Analysis**

Epistemological parallels between Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta, but different ontologies: Both systems stress experience rather than the intellectual or biblical. In Advaita it is called *aparoksha anubhuti* (immediate realization of Brahman) and in Mahayana it is called *prajna*. Both must find the ultimate truth within themselves. Both accept perception (*pratyaksha*) and inference (*anumana*) as the source of knowledge. In Mahayana (especially *Dignaga* and *Dharmakirti*) and Advaita Vedanta the *pramanas* are limited to these two. In Advaita and Buddhism, textual proof (*shabda*) is significant. Both systems acknowledge levels of reality: Advaita differentiates between empirical truth (relative truth) and ultimate truth (Brahman). Mahayana: *samvriti* (conventional truth) and *paramartha* (ultimate truth-emptiness/*shunyata*) They agree that everyday knowledge is valid, but only provisional. The last realization is beyond mind and duality. Both religions state that knowledge of concepts or thoughts is limited. Reasoning and analysis can unmask fallacies, but they cannot produce the final, liberating insight, which must come immediately and non-conceptually. Ignorance (*avidya* in Advaita, *avidya* or *moha* in Buddhism) is the cause of bondage and suffering. Both these religions teach us that knowledge is liberation from ignorance.

Mahayana Buddhism vs Advaita Vedanta: How do we know?

The way of knowing is different, but the epistemological basis is common in the Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism. The knowledge acquisition of Vedanta advaita consists in the search of the non-dual identity of Atman (Self) and Brahman. All valid things (*prama*) are to remove ignorance (*avidya*) of this oneness. 56. Deutsch, ends with “I am Brahman” (positive knowledge). Mahayana Buddhism All things are the void (*shunyata*) of wisdom. This is the highest wisdom (*prajna*) seeing into the non-self-nature of all things (Williams 70). Accepts perception, inference, and scriptural evidence. Advaita Vedanta The Upanishads are the knowledge of Brahman other than sense-perception and inference (Radhakrishnan 292).

*Dharmakirti*, Mahayana Buddhism, *Dignaga*. The only *pramanas* are perception and inference. Logic and personal verification are often more important than scriptural evidence (Dreyfus 51). In some Zen and Tibetan traditions direct meditation is more highly valued than *pramanas* (Deutsch 60): The understanding and the mind get rid of the misunderstanding and get ready, but the direct intuitive experience, the study of the scriptures and the instruction of the Guru lead to

enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhism Logic and analysis are part of the path, especially in the Madhyamaka and Yogacara. Philosophical discourse can expose myth, and thus reveal emptiness (Williams 81). The Upanishads and the views of Sankara are given the highest respect in Advaita Vedanta. Scripture, is the pramâGa of metaphysical knowledge and liberation. Mahayana Buddhism: texts are important, but so are reason and experience. Zen practitioners can skip the book and become enlightened fast. Advaita Vedanta: Ignorance is removed by Jnana and the true self is realized as Brahman. This is liberation (moksha). Mahayana Buddhism: Liberation (nirvana or bodhi) is attained by perceiving the emptiness of all dharmas, transcending attachment and ignorance, and by the realization of non-duality through Prajna.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of Advaita Vedanta is to realize the unity of Atman and Brahman and to remove the ignorance of this unity. Mahayana Buddhism attempts to understand the emptiness (shunyata ) of all things and to realize that there is no self-nature. In Advaita Vedanta knowledge of Brahman is gained by observation, inference and the evidence of the scriptures, principally the Upanishads. In the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, observation and inference are highly valued. It tends to favor reason and personal experience over scripture. Here's the bit about logic and analysis: Advaita Vedanta: Reasoning to help clear the misconceptions blocking intuitive awareness, with the help of a guru. In Mahayana Buddhism, especially Madhyamaka and Yogacara, reasoning and analysis are stressed to clear away misconceptions and uncover emptiness. Metaphysical understanding: The Upanishads and Shankaras commentaries in the Advaita Vedanta are the prime source of the metaphysical understanding. Mahayana Buddhist scripture should be tested by reason and experience. Some traditions may prefer direct enlightenment over canon adherence. Nature of Liberation: In Advaita Vedanta, liberation (moksha) is attained by realizing one's own true self as Brahman. In Mahayana Buddhism liberation (nirvana) is achieved through awakening to emptiness, transcending attachment and realizing non-duality through knowledge (Prajna).

The two epistemologies are better understood to enhance interfaith and intercultural relations. Knowledge is a way of being, a way of knowing. To know how each tradition perceives and manages knowledge is to appreciate other ways of viewing the world and to engage in real philosophical dialogue. Both approaches encourage critical thinking about the limits of knowledge. Both Mahayana and Advaita stress the importance of non-duality. The discussion of emptiness in both schools' challenges notions about the self and reality, and promotes critical thinking. These epistemologies were to demonstrate the usefulness but also the limits of logic,

of reason, and of the study of the bible. In both traditions the final truth is arrived at by direct, experiential knowledge that goes beyond conceptual cognition; emphasizing intuition, meditation and self-inquiry. Both traditions are mixing of empirical, intellectual and intuition knowledge. It advocates a holistic approach to knowledge which favours cognition, experience and contemplation. The epistemology of these systems has implications for ethical choices, spiritual pursuits and liberation or awakening. Both stress that real knowledge destroys ignorance and gives rise to compassion, non-attachment and change. The critique of fixed identities, rigid notions and unchecked beliefs in Advaita and Mahayana can be a fountainhead for contemporary philosophical, psychological and interfaith concerns about consciousness, self and reality.

Compare *pramana* (means of knowing) in Indian traditions with Confucian and Daoist philosophies of authenticity and knowledge (*cheng* and *zhi*). Compare and contrast the concepts of observation, inference and witness in Advaita Vedanta, Mahayana Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Anubhava, Wu Wei, Satori. See the stress on direct experience knowledge in Zen Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta and Daoism. Consider how they treat the limits of conceptual thought and the value of contemplative or meditative knowledge.

Investigate the significance of epistemic schemas in the process of moral development and ethical decision-making. For example, one may look at the relationship between knowledge and compassion in Mahayana, or the importance of *ren* (benevolence) in Confucianism. Buddhist epistemic logic (*Dignaga & Dharmakirti*) vs. Daoist paradoxes and Confucian dialectical reasoning. Follow the transmission, transformation or resistance of Indian principles of epistemology in the spread of Buddhism to China, Korea and Japan. Research East Asian Buddhist epistemology and its evolution in relation to indigenous ideologies. It is worth exploring the role of language, contradiction and silence in the epistemology of Advaita Vedanta, Mahayana Buddhism and Daoism. Consider the implications of non-dual and emptiness-based epistemologies for contemporary philosophy, cognitive science and comparative religion.

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