

Dreaming in Early Advaita Vedānta  
Śāṅkaracarya's View of Reality

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### Introduction

Q: What is the cause of the urge to roam about?

A: There is no cause. You merely dream that you roam about. In a few years your stay in India will appear as a dream to you. You will dream some other dream at that time. Do realize that it is not you who moves from dream to dream, but the dreams flow before you and you are the immutable witness. No happening affects your real being— that is the absolute truth.<sup>1</sup>

Śaṅkaracarya was an eighth century Indian philosopher who famously took on two powerful interlocutors of his time, revolutionizing the popular theory and practice of religion in India so effectively that he is still widely revered today, and the philosophy and practice he introduced mostly extant. Philosophically, he worked to reinterpret the Vedas, and the meaning of karma, so that his system maintained reliance upon the widely accepted authority of the Vedas, and yet changed the prescription for world-view and the execution of Vedic injunctions. Additionally, during Śaṅkara's time, Buddhism was widely practiced in India, so he often debated the Buddhists; his debates were recorded in his own writings, where he directly addressed his opposition to their theories and philosophy.<sup>2</sup> While Śaṅkara is often accused of being a crypto-Buddhist, it may be the case that he was simply influenced by the popularity of Buddhist philosophy which was so prevalent during his life. Even though Śaṅkara shares much with the Buddhists, the fundamental basis of his theory, a monism with Brahman at its center, is diametrically opposed to the emptiness that lies at the heart of Buddhism.

It would be extremely difficult to separate the influences and roots of Indian religions, especially during the time of Śaṅkara when the historical records are sparse, but it is the interest of the scholar of religious history to speculate on matters of influence. With that in mind, the current paper aims to draw a picture of how Śaṅkara portrayed his philosophy, and then to briefly hypothesize by way of the conclusion on how he may have influenced later buddhist movements, especially in the presentation of thought around Dreaming. The reason for doing so is that Śaṅkara emphasized four states of being, one of which is dreaming, a state which later

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<sup>1</sup> Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, *I Am That* (Mumbai: Sundaram Art Printing Press, 1973), 318.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from an interview with M.A. Narasimhan in Mysore, India, on December 29, 2013.

came to take on even greater significance in the “Six Yogas of Naropa”, a seminal practice in the transmission of yoga from India to Tibet. However, dreaming is not developed into a practice in Śaṅkara’s system, but is rather embedded in the four psychological “states of being” that humans experience. By examining Śaṅkara’s system as a whole, and then how he relates to dreaming, I hope to come to a better understanding of the potentials of the dream state as it was presented in early Indian thought to provide a platform for later innovations in practice.

The first reference to these four states of being is found in the Upaniṣads dating from around 700 B.C.<sup>3</sup> The states are waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and a supernatural, transcendent state that most closely approximates a human manifestation of or union with God. Because the meaning of the Upaniṣads was ambiguous and therefore open to interpretation, for more than one-thousand years they were integrated into several different Vedāntic philosophical systems, until they were placed at the center of the Advaita Vedānta tradition by Śaṅkara (700-750 A.D.) and also his guru’s Guru, Gauḍapada. The work of these two early Indian thinkers was pivotal in the exegesis of the Vedas, because the system they put forth took a completely different view on how to interpret fundamental tenets of Hindu thought, especially as they relate to the actions that must be done in order to gain liberation from suffering, as well as the view of heaven and/or liberation itself.

We will see that dreaming is the quintessential metaphor of Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta, and an in-depth look at the way he talks about dreaming provides visceral insight into the realities of perception itself according to Śaṅkara. Specifically, the fundamental premise of Advaita Vedānta is that everything is an illusion; since most people agree with the presupposition that dreams are illusions of the mind, it is an apt starting point from which to describe Śaṅkara’s views of reality, which expand the dream metaphor beyond the dreaming state and apply it to waking life. Let us now take an in-depth look at Śaṅkara’s philosophy; we will return to speculation about its influence on Tibetan Buddhism as rudimentary suggestions in the conclusion.

### **Bondage and Transmigration**

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<sup>3</sup> Wendy Doniger, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 15.

Bondage is the fundamental problem that Śaṅkara, and all Indian philosophers, set out to uproot. What are we bonded to? Transmigratory existence (saṃsāra), the self-perpetuating and continual cycle of suffering, which carries on from life to life in an endless stream of different situations and embodied forms that accompany an individual or ātman, all colored by karmic tendencies. Karmic tendencies are quite literally the spice of life, the ink in the printer, the projector of the movie, existing as residual impressions of past actions whose function is to fill in the colors, shapes and sensations of life.<sup>4</sup> Ignorance is the root cause that allows for these karmas to be accrued in the mind of a person.

Karma is not all people are made of however, for at the time of death, a person is in possession of several discrete attributes. We are going to take a look at the process of death and rebirth so as to ground ourselves in the cosmology surrounding Śaṅkara's theories.

The distinction between the body and mind itself is what allows for transmigration to occur, and a new physical form to become associated with a person, for while bodies are cast aside and new ones taken up, the mind continues in an unbroken stream.<sup>5</sup> If we were to take an inventory of an individual's true possessions at the time of death, this is what they would have:

- A gross body made up of material substances;
- Sense organs and their corresponding actions, such as speech, movement, thinking, grasping, sex, and excretion;<sup>6</sup>
- An intellectual sense organ (manas);
- A sense of ego that makes one feel as though they are individual and unique,<sup>7</sup> and also makes distinctions among objects of attention<sup>8</sup> (ahaṃkāra);
- An internal organ (buddhi or antaḥkaraṇa) whose function is to point the attention faculty towards an object with intention, and the subsequent activities associated with these intentions;

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Potter, *The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings: The Upadeśasāhasrī of Śaṅkara* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 69.

<sup>6</sup> This list is particular to the Advaita system; other philosophical schools enumerate and include different aspects of action in this list as sense functions.

<sup>7</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> This addition was taken from an interview with Sri Narasimhan, M.A., an Indian philosopher/ philologist, in the city of Mysore, Karnataka, in December 2013.

- Traces of karma, or impressions from past actions, accumulated from both the current and past lives, whose effects have yet to be realized.<sup>9</sup>

In their fruition karmic traces effect the internal organ (buddhi) and force it to long after certain experiences and results; people are constantly at the effect of their past actions which force them into a state of desire. Karmas in their more ripened form are termed *vāsanās*, and it is the *vāsanās* that create the link between one life to the next.

In contrast to these fluctuating, dependent and usually afflicted states is the *ātman*, the essence of the individual that is permanent and most closely related to the concept of a soul. Suffice it to say for now that the *ātman*'s role in the manifestation of life is as a simple unchanging observer of this process, and also as a sort of satellite of Brahman, the everlasting and radiant God.

At the time of death there is a process where the senses sequentially absorb and reduce into one another, starting with the speech and intellect, then the rest of the sense organs into the mental organ (*manas*), which is in turn absorbed into energy (*prāṇa*), then finally into the individual self (*jiva*), a collection of both awareness and karmic residues, as well as karmic residues that have already ripened into their manifest state as inclinations (*vāsanās*). The *jiva* then combines with the subtle elements (*tanmātras*), five different kinds of minute particles that are the seeds for the gross manifestations of the five gross elements, i.e. earth, water, air, fire and ether. The *tanmātras*, or subtle elements, are the subtle body that will receive much attention both in Śāṅkara's system of practice, as well as in later examples of spiritual practices that aim to manipulate the subtle energies of the body.

In the process of death within the perpetuation of *saṃsāra* (transmigratory existence), keep in mind that the organs have ceased functioning. However, the body is still the location where the *jiva* resides, and after the dissolution of the senses the *jiva* takes up temporary residence at the center of the heart. By some unknown process some particular karma ripens into a *vāsanā*, or tendency, which forces the *jiva* to take some particular direction of exit from the body via one of the subtle channels; the direction taken determines the destiny and quality of the rebirth taken. Clearly there is some relationship between this model and later elaborate Buddhist

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<sup>9</sup> It would be interesting to understand in greater detail where in the psychology of the mind these traces reside.

practices concerning the death process which aim to drive the subtle energies into a particular direction in order to control the resultant state of rebirth.

That moment when the jiva has been directed by the ripening of karma to send energy into a particular subtle energetic pathway is the real moment of death because the jiva has left the region of the heart and goes out of the body. It enters into a sort of in-between state, taking what are referred to as either the Northern or Southern path; which path one takes is dictated by one's relationship with God and how they fulfilled their ritual obligations. For those who did not take up ritual, they are immediately reborn as animals, insects or plants.

This in-between state has been likened to a dream because there is a certain consciousness present.<sup>10</sup> In fact, in Śaṅkara's only non-commentarial monograph, the *Upadeśasāhasrī*, which might be a source of his unqualified philosophical position by nature of its being an independent monograph, he posits that transmigratory existence (*saṃsāra*) can be described either via the cycle in which one takes up and then casts aside different bodies with their associated functions, *or* it is the cycle of dreaming and waking, qualified by agency and experience. This type of transmigratory existence is experienced at every moment of life, and is used to incite the follower to pursue liberation, or *mokṣa*.

To Śaṅkara, the cycle of waking and dreaming is important because actions (*karma*) ripen both in waking and dreaming states. The embodied system is summarized by Śaṅkara as follows:

*Karmans (as the results of actions, food or bad, in the past existence) produce association with a body. When there is association with a body, pleasant and unpleasant things are inevitable. From these result passion and aversion (and) from them actions (kriyā). (Upadeśasāhasrī I, 1.3)*

*(From actions) merit (dharma) and demerit (adharma) result and from merit and demerit there results an ignorant man's association with a body in the same manner again. Thus this transmigratory existence rolls onward powerfully forever like a wheel. (Upadeśasāhasrī I, 1.4)<sup>11</sup>*

Returning to the consideration of the in-between state, if one is fortunate enough to take the Northern or Southern path, one is guided to the next life by deities through the process of transmigration. If, because of bad karma, one takes a lower rebirth into the realm of Yama, the god of death, they are immediately reborn as an animal, plant or even a piece of grain—their

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<sup>10</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 24-5.

<sup>11</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 71.

subtle body being encapsulated in their new “body,” experiencing the pains of their existence as if they are in a dream. Eventually they become food for humans, and when ingested combine with the blood or semen of the person who is eating, and along normal lines of reproduction become born. This may be the source of the importance of food in Indian culture, because the karma of purer beings will end up in purer foodstuffs, so eating pure foods is advantageous for having children with superior karma.

The food eaten by the mother during gestation becomes the body of the new person, colored by their own *vāsanās*, and also assuming a genetic inheritance from the parents as well, which is why children look like their parents.

Thus the child is born, and the description of karma gets elaborated on at this point, for the child is endowed with three different kinds of karmas. One type is a sort of throwing karma that dictates the duration of life barring accidental death (*prārabdha*), while the others dictate the types of experiences to be undergone.<sup>12</sup>

An alternative presentation of transmigratory existence, one more reminiscent of Buddhism, is also given by Śaṅkara. In this brief presentation, karmas are the results of past actions that cause one to be connected with a *body*. The basis of the body is the source of all experiences of *pleasure and pain*, and from those states *desire and aversion* arise. Based on desire and aversion, *actions* are undertaken, which result in the accumulation of *merit and demerit* (karma), which then leads back into the start of the cycle again.

### **Ātman and Brahman**

In discussing transmigration we have glimpsed the various components that make up the individual, as well as the process of reincarnation from life to life. It is now essential to embed the view of the self within the duo of ātman and Brahman, which are ontologically the only real, non-illusory aspects of Śaṅkara’s system. Ignorance, or *āvidya*, and *māyā*, the play of illusion, are the cause for the creation of the illusory world that is based on ātman/ Brahman.

There could not possibly be any positive language that could describe Brahman, for Brahman is only apparent when all obscurations have been removed. Brahman has no name or form, and likewise does not possess any human qualities. There is a higher and a lower aspect of

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<sup>12</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 25-30.

Brahman, and when one has knowledge in the form of a direct perception of higher Brahman (nirguṇa, without qualities), that itself is liberation (mokṣa).

Brahman is the singular and ultimate cause of the universe, and is also ātman, equal to the individual self or soul, which acts as the passive perceiver of all the states that are subsequently caused after ignorance. As the cause of the universe, Brahman is responsible for the trinity of creation, subsistence, and destruction, the three main functions that later are personified as the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Śiva. This higher Brahman is different from the material world.

Brahman also has a lower form with positive qualities, which is God, and it is possible to know this God even through ignorant states (āvidya).<sup>13</sup> Lower Brahman has the three qualities of sat, cit and ānanda, respectively translated as Being, Consciousness, and Bliss.<sup>14</sup> Sat, or being, is passive, non-composite, not subject to origination or destruction, and unchanging.

Cit, or Consciousness, is a much more informative and dynamic concept, which is the aspect of awareness and witness of all of creation. Cit is the radiant illuminator that shines a light onto all other objects. It has no form unto itself, so it also does not possess an aspect of subjectivity, nor can it become an object of awareness. However, a certain amount of direct access is afforded to Cit, because it is said to be perceived in the third state of the four psychological states of a person, that of deep sleep. However, the objects that normally appear to the cit are all the products of ignorance (āvidya).

Ānanda, or bliss, the third aspect of lower Brahman, is a special type of bliss, which is completely different from the mundane, temporary pleasure known by ordinary people. In a rather surprising assertion, Śaṅkara suggests that even the liberated being does not experience the Bliss of Brahman. However, it still lies at the center of our very being, and later writers suggest that the fleeting experience of pleasure is a taste of this joy that is our very nature.<sup>15</sup>

When Brahman creates the universe, it is essentially a process of self-creation or transformation (pariṇāma), because Brahman is both the creator, and is also everything that it creates. Therefore, an important distinction between different Hindu philosophical schools lies in the differences between creator and what is created, because whether creator and creation are

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<sup>13</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 74.

<sup>14</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 75-6.



different or the same qualifies the system as monist or dualist. In Śāṅkara's system, the creator and created are identical, even though their appearances are different. Hence, because of the non-difference between all aspects of creator and creation, this system qualifies as monist simply because it ultimately only has one constituent.<sup>16</sup>

While higher Brahman remains untouched, it is lower Brahman, or God (Īśvara) that is the source of the diversity of life because it is conditioned by ignorance. This aspect presents some problems, because while lower Brahman/ God is indeed omniscient and omnipotent, he seems to be at the effect of ignorance and not the other way around, which presents some logical inconsistencies. The problem, specifically, is that how is it possible for ignorance to be more powerful than that which is omnipotent, and to force it to manifest in a certain way? The only explanation has to be that it is God's will for there to be ignorance, but then the problem arises of why God would create so much suffering in the world. It seems that Śāṅkara did not have all the answers to these questions, and he left them to be dealt with by later thinkers within his tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Śāṅkara tries to reconcile this problem by claiming that all objects exist in relation to the consciousness which apprehends them, which is lower, or saḡuṇa Brahman. Saḡuṇa is translated as "with qualities," and the qualities attributed to this God/ Īśvara are the entire universe, which is the body of God. God is therefore infinite, omniscient and omnipotent in its will, and the changes that occur are orderly in that they are aligned with God's will. The higher Brahman comes into the picture as the witness of everything, and is termed nirguṇa, or "without qualities" because its only role is the knowledge or witnessing of reality. Because God is constantly witnessing reality, the existence of the world does not depend on the perception of individuals for its existence. God is the witness that validates the continuity and real-ness of objects outside of the perception of any individual, and God is involved with every aspect of creation. If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, it does make a sound, because God is the one who hears it.

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<sup>16</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 76-8.

In the above regard, Śaṅkara's innovation was to introduce the aspect of nirguṇa Brahman that runs parallel to all the manifest reality, which is the perfect manifestation of saguṇa Brahman that creates, maintains and destroys.<sup>18</sup>

Another issue is that of God's reason to create anything at all. There is no specific problem that is addressed by God's creation; he has neither desires to satisfy, nor any interests to fulfill. He merely creates out of a sense of playfulness (līlā). He simply cannot help himself, although this explanation also leaves something to be desired. Even though God is presented in such an impersonal and unmotivated fashion, he still manages to conjure up a great deal of devotion from Śaṅkara and his followers.

### **Ignorance and Illusion**

It is not clear where the first appearance of āvidyā (ignorance) and māyā (illusion) are found, nor the equating of the two concepts that Śaṅkara concretized in his writings, although some have pointed to rather infrequent references in both the Ṛg Veda or some of the older Upaniṣads.<sup>19</sup> Gauḍapada makes sixteen references to the two separate concepts, but does not equate them in the way Śaṅkara did.<sup>20</sup>

Māyā/ illusion is the basis of error inherent to all human perception and judgment, and that illusion is also the substance that Brahman creates the world out of. The fact that māyā is the creative power of Brahman implies that maybe the word "illusion" falls short as a translation for the creative power of God. Māyā itself in actuality if the Lord/ Īśvara in that it is an aspect of it, in the same way that heat is an aspect of fire.

The power of māyā is to veil reality, just as a small cloud can veil the rays of the sun, which would otherwise cover great expanses of the earth with its rays. The cloud itself is only visible, however, because of the power of the rays of the sun itself. In the same way, māyā gives rise to avidyā, ignorance.<sup>21</sup>

In order to explain how ignorance and illusion manifest of out Brahman, Śaṅkara introduced a new concept into Hindu philosophy that he borrowed from the *Chāndogya*

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<sup>18</sup> V. Keshava Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1976), 50-3.

<sup>19</sup> For more on this, see Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 78-80.

<sup>21</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya*, 55.

*Upaniṣad* called “Unevolved Name and Form” (avyākṛte nāmarūpe), which refers to a primary material which is the source of the evolution of the world, like a seed of manifold existence. This concept seems to have been designed to take the place of the Sāṃkhya system’s prakṛti, which provides an easy, although dualist, solution for the problem of a diverse world and an unchanging basis (puruṣa). While the diversity of the world for the Sāṃkhyas all evolve directly out of one of the two dualist components to the system, namely from prakṛti, Śaṅkara tried to use the dualist explanation, but to fit it into his monist presentation by including diversity as an aspect of Brahman. In order to do so, he used the elements, and does not really describe how the first step happens, but merely states that from Brahman the element of ether subtly manifested. From ether evolved air; then fire; then water; and then finally earth so that we have a five element progressive system of manifestation and evolution. From earth’s combination with the other elements, all material things are produced, such as grains and plants. When those things are eaten, they create the bodies of men and women, who come together and make new people through reproduction. This is an important key to Śaṅkara’s system, because Unevolved Name and Form eventually develops into evolved name and form, which are the objects that comprise existence. In a reversal of that process, there is always the possibility of reducing objects back to simply name and form: everything is merely name and form. In that way, things are not real. The illusion of name and form is what people see, and it is a manifestation of Brahman. None of the manifestation is real in an ultimate sense, although it is relatively real, in a common sense interpretation.

At this point Śaṅkara has come dangerously close to approximating a dualist Sāṃkhya view of reality, nearly abandoning his main assertion, that of monism—everything is Brahman. In doing so, he also contradicted some of the Vedas that claim that material elements cannot possibly evolve directly from higher Brahman, which itself is Pure Consciousness and is not capable of creation. In explaining the unity of Brahman and Unevolved Name and Form, Śaṅkara uses the analogy of clear water and dirty foam floating upon the clear water. The foam could not possibly exist without the water, its source; so while the foam is not identical with the water, neither is it completely different from it, since it cannot possibly exist without the water. We all know that dirty foam is different from pure water. Water is clear and pure like ātman, while foam corresponds to name and form. This reasoning is rather weak because a metaphor does not explain the mechanics of how name and form evolve from Brahman. While the analogy

maintains that the two aspects come from the same source, and that water/ Brahman is pure and of higher value, it does not explain specifically how name and form evolve from Brahman. It is easy to deduce how foam is created on water, but the analogy falls short in the realm of creation, or possibly requires a leap of faith.

Nonetheless, God is the one with the power to create illusion in the Advaita philosophy, and therefore the accusal is made that ignorance belongs to God himself and not the individual, which is another point of contention in Śaṅkara's system. However, Śaṅkara retorts that this does not mean that Brahman is ignorant, because ignorance (āvidyā) is unreal, and has no effect on Brahman.

God gets all the credit for the creation of the world, and none is given to the individual self, which is a defining feature of Advaita. While the individual is responsible for their own misconstrual of reality, the onus of creation lies on God. Our misconception is thinking that the world is real and not an illusion of God's making. The illusion exists independent of our thoughts, and will not go away because of any action undertaken by an individual. However, it is not a figment of our imagination: it exists as God's play.<sup>22</sup> God is unaffected by his own creation.

### **Liberation**

It would be essentially useless to point out the problem of transmigratory existence without proposing a functional solution, and like most Indian philosophical systems, mokṣa, or liberation is the goal here. What constitutes liberation to the Advaitin? "Being, knowing, and experiencing one's true Self."<sup>23</sup> When one is no longer forced to experience birth, aging, death and rebirth, and experiences their own true Self, then liberation has been achieved. The experience of the true Self is essentially the key to the majority of teachings on Advaita Vedānta.

As we have already seen, the process of transmigration is caused by our ignorance (avidyā), but that ignorance is simply obscuring the true Self which is already there, fully developed, radiant and perfect. Therefore, liberation does not require any kind of positive transformation or development, but rather it must be revealed. In that vein, liberation has no beginning or end, because it has always been there. It exists nowhere else but right here, so there is neither heaven nor hell to go to.

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<sup>22</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 32.

Because liberation cannot be achieved through action, there is also no possibility for falling from grace down into hells because of negative actions that take place. Because of this, Śāṅkara has been accused of being amoral because there is no punishment system in place for bad deeds; however, in actuality Śāṅkara includes moral injunctions throughout his writings at the more beginning stages of spiritual development.

Instead of being bound to performing particular actions, the crux of the message of pre-Advaita Vedantic thinkers, especially that of the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, to achieve liberation according to Śāṅkara's methods, one must abandon action altogether, for both pure and impure deeds result in bondage. However, the *Bhagavad Gītā* warns against not taking any action at all, which would mean not performing one's duties, and assures us that that too is an action, the action of failing to fulfill one's dharma.

Śāṅkara takes avidyā as his opponent, for as long as ignorance is operating, the cycle of desire, and then the activation of karmas (mental impressions) ripen into inclinations (vāsanās), which are then acted upon to plant new karmic seeds that provide fuel for the cycle.

Avidyā cannot be destroyed by any action whatsoever. It is, on the other hand, destroyed by the perfection of its opposite, knowledge (vidyā). In this system, knowing itself is not an act at all, and therefore its possession does not incur the accumulation of karma. In fact, we already have it, and we simply need to call our attention to it by creating the appropriate circumstances.

Getting to the state of liberation is like what happens to the space in a pot when the pot breaks, which is in reality nothing at all. When a pot breaks, nothing happens to the space inside of it; in the same when, upon liberation, the mokṣa that was already our core remains the same. Gauḍapada even went so far as to say that there is no liberation at all.

When ignorance is removed, actions (karmas) cannot become activated. They are not able to fulfill their potential, and like a burnt seed, are no longer able to sprout. Furthermore, the actions that still must be undertaken in the lifetime of the person no longer subject to avidyā, who possesses perfect knowledge, do not leave behind any karmic residues.

If a person were to take up some action as an antidote, it would be as useless as the checkout clerk at Whole Foods saying, "I am the owner of this grocery chain." Just to say, "I am Brahman" is equally useless, because it will get you nowhere. One is only the owner of the store when they possess all the qualities of ownership, such as the title, bank account, and knowledge of how to run the store. You can work to get those qualities, but there is no injunction that can be

done that will coerce one into the possession of them. The qualities will appear when they do. Īśvara is the mediator between the unconditioned Brahman and the conditioned jiva that functions until the conditioning has been removed.

Some action is required in the process of removing the obscurations to Brahman and achieving liberation, because the state of ignorance has to be comprehended in order to transcend it. Therefore, adherents must contemplate unreality in juxtaposition to the reality of Brahman, and in order to do that, Īśvara itself is the ideal object.<sup>24</sup>

### **Another Look at the Problems of Advaita Vedānta**

We still have yet to solve yet another big problem, explaining how diversity arises from a single entity (nirguṇa Brahman), and also how individuals (jiva) arise from the one Self (ātman). Furthermore, how does the appearance of the world relate to God, and also how do our personal experiences relate to God? Later Advaita authors contributed much to these subjects, but Śaṅkara makes attempts to do so as well, again mostly through the use of analogy.

To address how the self (jiva) constructs objects through its own illusion, the metaphor of a rope and a snake is used. If at dusk one happens upon a snake, and then realizes that it is not a snake, but actually a rope, the mechanism by which the snake is imputed onto the common shape is the *memory*. The mind superimposes an available memory onto an unknown entity. It is interesting to note that the element of fear is not addressed by Advaita thinkers, including Śaṅkara: snakes are fear inducing animals, and no one ever seems to guess that it is simply a hose or some other cylindrical object. Regardless, the rope represents the positive quality of Brahman that remains upon realization that the snake does not exist and was an illusion. Another way of seeing the rope/ snake duo is that the snake is simply an aspect of the rope.

Additionally, the rope/ snake analogy is applied to the process of transmigration. Higher Brahman cannot transmigrate because it does not change; however, the individual self also cannot transmigrate because it is not real. Therefore, in the same way that the snake is not real, transmigration itself is also not real. It is just like the snake in that it moves and feels throughout the existence of the rope until it supposedly takes on a new form, but in actuality it assimilates back into Brahman.

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<sup>24</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya*, 53-55.

Another prominent metaphor that demonstrates certain philosophical points is that of a pot and the space inside, which is used to explain how an individual, non-dual object is able to produce duality without being modified itself. Just as space can be partitioned with the use of a pot without itself being affected, so too can Brahman be divided into individual jivas (selves) without undergoing any real change. Moreover, when the pot is destroyed, the space inside of it effortlessly merges with the surrounding space, just as upon liberation a jiva simply and effortlessly re-merges with the Divine.<sup>25</sup>

### **Dreaming as a Metaphor for Reality in Advaita Vedānta**

Many analogies are used to show how the one God-Self develops into the various and diverse forms that constitute reality. However, none of the analogies are without problem, because they all rest on a basis of two things, namely a perceiver and an obstruction to perception, and the duality inherent in the metaphor falls short in a monist system. Since it is fundamental to the Advaita view that all such obstructions to perception are essentially unreal, the metaphors are fundamentally flawed in their ability to clearly relate the system.

There is another analogy that might succeed because it does not depend on a subject-object duality, and it is that of dreaming. Everyone agrees simply by common sense that dreams are not produced from the perception of an external reality, but are rather productions of the mind of a perceiver. As a metaphor this suggests that objects experienced in waking life are just as unreal as those in a dream, and that in the same way that we can wake up from a dream, we can also “wake up” to the reality of our situation, which lies in stark contrast to how we normally perceive it.

To elaborate on the field of dreaming, let us first turn our attention to greater detail of the four states of the Self that can be distinguished among the mental states of a person. These four states encompass all the possible states of mind in the realm of experience. They are the different ways that the ātman appears, even though in actuality it is only one singular entity, because when the filter of ignorance is applied to it distortion occurs, just as a translucent gem appears differently when a color is placed behind it.

Until now we have mostly concerned ourselves with the first state, the waking state, which is comprised of the mental and psychological experiences undergone on a day-to-day

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<sup>25</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 78-85.

basis. The ego is confined to the waking state, and the jiva only comes into contact with phenomena on this level of consciousness. When the ātman is in the waking state the five sense organs are active, the internal sense organs are functional, and there is consciousness of external objects.<sup>26</sup>

The second state is the dream state, where only the internal organs function, and consciousness is aware of internal things. Specifically, the object of awareness is the vāsanās, or ripened karmic tendencies of things that had been grasped onto in the waking state and stored in the memory. Here the ātman is freed from the limitations of embodiment and perception that encumber it during waking life, and is in a state that is more pure unto itself. For Śāṅkara dreams are as real as waking reality upon a finite investigation and regression of what lies beneath. For example, the ultimate analysis of a material object such as a chair shows that it is made mostly of empty space, and that its actual material substance is more of a lack than anything else. Dreams are just as real as waking reality in that while their basis of reality is minutely small, so too is that of waking reality. Dreams do not have a special status in this system, but are rather another mode of being in reality and illusion, powered by ignorance. Their relative truth is just as relevant as that of waking life. Waking life also lacks utter realness in the same way that dreams do.

However, there is a difference between being awake and dreaming. One does not dream while awake, and the possibilities for visual imagery differ significantly. Nonetheless, the self-consciousness apparent in dreaming is used as another proof that the ātman is the witnessing consciousness of the self, which does not depend on a certain embodied form, but maintains continuity throughout the difference experiences of reality. Further, the world of dreams cannot be shared with others in the same way that the realities of waking life are clearly shared among different people. If different realities did not exist, then the liberation of the first person would have been the liberation for everyone, which is not the case.<sup>27</sup>

In the third state, deep sleep, no objects are encountered whatsoever, and even the internal organs cease to function. Even though nothing is perceived in the state of deep sleep, the Pure Consciousness of Brahman continues to be present and the jiva merges into it. There is no object of perception, but the fundamental basis of the ātman remains. In this state, the ātman is

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<sup>26</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 43-5.

<sup>27</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya*, 76-77.



free from the pain and suffering experienced in waking and dreaming states. It is a more pure form, but it is not in an ultimately pure state. This state acts as a kind of home base for waking and dreaming to keep coming back to, and is a sort of seed for those two. It is precisely this seed that gets burnt by the attainment of knowledge upon liberation.<sup>28</sup> Śaṅkara explains deep sleep as a state that occurs when the organs are tired, including the internal (sense) organs, and become temporarily absorbed into the breath, so that they cease functioning and no objects are perceived. There is no sense of subjectivity in the state of deep sleep, whereas in the dream state a sense of embodiment occurs.<sup>29</sup> However, a thin veil of *māyā* remains even in the state of deep sleep, so it is not a state of liberation.

The three previous states are as impermanent as any other material object such as clothes or wealth, and have their basis in ignorance. The fourth state, *turiya*, transcends all the other states, and is the state of liberation.<sup>30</sup> It cannot be expressed by words because it is Brahman, and it is the same in everyone. It is non-dual in nature, but concealed by ignorance. Śaṅkara puts it like this:

The dream state becomes unreal in the waking state, nor does the waking state exist in dream and sleep; both dream and waking state are absent in the deep sleep state; sleep, too, is absent in waking and in dreams. Because of their mutual contradictions the three states are unreal; but the Self is the Eternal Witness of the three states and is thus beyond them; It is the One which is the nature of pure consciousness.”<sup>31</sup>

While Gauḍapada asserts that the objects of waking life are equally illusory as are the objects of a dream, Śaṅkara expands on his work by pointing out important differences. First of all and rather significantly, he makes the claim that the objects of dreaming are supplied solely by the *jiva*, while the objects of waking life are created by God’s will. Second he says that all dream objects are eventually assimilated into Brahman, while only some objects of waking life become assimilated.

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<sup>28</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 43-5.

<sup>29</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 90.

<sup>30</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 43-4.

<sup>31</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracharya*, 81.

### Śaṅkara on Dreaming

Śaṅkara did not use the dream metaphor to deny the reality of waking life, because as we have already seen, the reality of waking life is God itself, or rather can be seen as “the body of God.” However, dreams metaphorically convey the illusion or concealment of the reality of Brahman. Everyone accepts that the objects in dreams are not real. While they are created, sustained, and then go out of existence over a brief period of time, they never seem to be real in the way that waking life does from the perspective of being awake. Accepting their unreality is easy, and yet the reality of waking life does seem real—we do not regularly wake up from waking life and see it as an illusion through our own experience. However, according to Śaṅkara, objects of both waking life and of dreams originate in the same source, and are equally unreal. Let us now turn to a selection of Śaṅkara’s own writings on dreaming.

#### **From the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, Third Chapter, Second Section**

111.2.1-6 The world of our dreams is not real, it is merely *māyā*, since things happen in dreams that cannot happen in reality (that is, in the waking world). For example, there isn’t room for dreamt of chariots in the actual body; the sleeper cannot go to points far away in a single moment; the sleeper’s body cannot remain visible to others on a couch while it is far away experiencing things in quite another place; he dreams it is day when it is night, and it can’t be both at once. Nevertheless these illusory dreams may be prophetic. The waking world—“real” by comparison with the dream world— is still not absolutely real, as we have seen earlier; the dream world is sublated each morning when we awake, whereas the waking world remains until ultimate realization of Brahman’s identity with the Self. As long as the self is blinded by ignorance it cannot produce for its experience anything real, even though it is ultimately non-different from God; thus whereas God can create the waking world, which is relatively real, the self bound by ignorance can only produce unreal dream objects, its true powers concealed by ignorance.<sup>32</sup>

The first striking point that Śaṅkara makes about dreaming is that dreams are not real because there is no room for the objects of dreaming within the body of the dreamer, like for example if one dreams of a car, the car could not possibly exist within the confines of their body as it lays in the state of sleeping and dreaming. Nonetheless, the dreams are not totally useless, because they can function as signs or prophesies of some higher truth. Furthermore, just as when we wake up in the morning, the experiences that have been incurred while dreaming integrate

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<sup>32</sup> Potter, *Encyclopedia*, 172.

into our personhood or being, in the same when, when we wake up to our true nature's equivalence with Brahman, our waking life too will appear to us just as unreal as a dream does now, and yet will be absorbed into Brahman like everything else.

**From the *Upadeśasāhasrī*, Chapter 14 on “Dream and Memory**

1. Since the form-and-color of a jar, etc., is seen appearing in dream and memory, it is certainly to be inferred that the intellect has previously been seen in that form.
2. Just as one oneself is not the body which is seen wandering about begging alms in the dreaming state, so is he different from the body which is seen in the waking state, since he is the seer (of the body).
3. Just as molten copper appears in the form of the mold into which it was poured, so it is certainly experienced that the mind, when pervading the external objects such as form-color, appears in their forms.
4. Or, just as light, the illuminator, assumes the forms of what it illuminates, so the intellect is seen to have the forms of its objects, since it is the illuminator of all the objects.
5. And the intellect in the form of certain objects must have been seen by the dreaming man before also. If not, how could he see these forms in the dreaming state? Again, when a form is being recalled, whence would it come to him?<sup>33</sup>

How are the objects of dreaming projected? Śaṅkara tells us here that it is through the mechanism of memory that forms take their shapes, and again we are reminded that past experiences dictate present ones. Nothing is outside of the system whereby the imprints of past actions take the shape of mental impressions. They are stored in jiva, the individual that is associated with the ātman. It is interesting that even though according to Śaṅkara's philosophy all of creation is the will of God, the role of the individual seems to fill in the names and forms of reality. The only way to resolve the discrepancy is to posit a lack of free will to the individual, and attribute all individuals' actions to the will of God.

For Śaṅkara, persons are in the middle of a chain of cause and effect that makes up the world. The individual is most certainly under the effect of her previous actions, but seems to be free to create new events in the future through the choices she makes in her present actions. This is a widely accepted view of the laws of karma in Indian philosophy, where there is a strong sense of agency in the theory on karma, insofar as the agent decides whether or not to take up an

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<sup>33</sup> Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 136.

act. However, if the availability of the current choices of actions depends solely on past actions, the logical conclusion would be an *infinite regress of repetitive actions*—always more of the same. Further, in this system, there are infinite previous lives and no first life which is the beginning of the process— life is infinite and beginningless. The only way to get out of the conundrum of being stuck in within a repetitive cycle of actions that repeat themselves, according to Advaitin philosophy, is to not take the world too seriously, to see it as simply an illusion that will become unimportant upon the realization that this is all a dream, and Brahman is the one true ultimate reality.

We are here reminded that reality is of two natures, just like the Buddhist system, the first reality being the ultimacy of Brahman. In Buddhism the ultimate truth is actually emptiness, but they both are quality-less realities with no positive characteristics. Śaṅkara appropriates the Buddhist Two Truths model, assigning the illusion of God’s play (*māyā*) to conventional truth. The issue of agency relates only to the conventional side of the model, because no subject/ object duality applies to Brahman— it is pure witness consciousness and also is the essence of monism.

Because the issue of agency only applies to conventional, relative truth, we shall go back to Śaṅkara’s two main interlocutors whom he relied upon to demonstrate his philosophy. When Śaṅkara takes on his Vedantic counterparts, the Mīmāṃsakas, he appears to reject karma altogether because he rejects their notion of agent, action and effect. He does not allow for the dogmatic, marketplace approach where actions buy good results if prescribed by Vedic injunction.

On the other hand, when engaging the Buddhists in debate, he must defend a foundational consciousness which acts as a storehouse of karma which is the origin of the chain of actions and results.

Śaṅkara places himself in the middle between these two. When discussing ultimate reality, he says that Brahman is devoid of an agent with a will because he must uphold the non-dual nature of Brahman. However, conventional reality approximates the dependent origination of Buddhism, which is mildly deterministic due to the power of past actions to create present reality, combined with the free will to make decisions within the confines of what is presented.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Sthaneshwar Timalsina, “Self, Causation and Agency in the Advaita of Sankara,” in *Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Indian Philosophy*, ed. Matthew Dasti and Edwin Bryant, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 186-88.

### Was Śaṅkara a Crypto-Buddhist?

Śaṅkara has been accused of being a crypto-Buddhist even though he explicitly disagreed with the Buddhists in many places in his writing and philosophy. He did not accept the Buddhist philosophical view that we have no real self but only a succession of mental states. To Śaṅkara, the commonplace reality of the world as we see it is as real as possible given the circumstances. Objects are real, and even unreal objects such as the rope mistaken to be a snake has a reality of its own. To Śaṅkara, the denial of reality is only unreal compared to what is real. Therefore, when he states that Brahman is the sole reality, he is implying a relative truth to the phenomenal world.<sup>35</sup>

On first glance, Śaṅkara's system appears to have much in common with Buddhism, from the dependent nature of relative truth, to the goals of liberation (mokṣa) from a beginningless cycle of transmigratory existence (saṃsara), to the system of karma, what happens at death, and finally the cause for all of creation, ignorance (avidyā).

However, the shared components are only the same upon a shallow glance. First of all, the early Buddhist view is restricted mostly to the waking state, and gives much less significance to the state of dreaming. That, however, changed in Tibet where dreaming became an important opportunity to practice meditation in order to altar the habits of the mind via Dream Yoga.

Both Advaita Vedānta and the Buddhists say that the world is an illusion and completely unreal. However, Śaṅkara posits a caveat where the illusion only extends to being bound up in transmigratory existence conditioned by the state of ignorance. For Buddhism, ignorance is also the cause. However, Śaṅkara has something which is ultimately real, and that is Brahman. When looked at from the ultimate point of view, the reality of Śaṅkara's system is very real, and the Buddhists simply do not have a concrete reality to rely on.

For the Advaitins, life is not a collection of concepts. For example, ideas of dogs do not bark, real dogs do. While Buddhism gives no fixed reality to objects, they do allow for a certain amount of realness as well in the system of dependent origination, or relative truth. Therefore, for both systems, all objects in relative truth are as real as possible considering the circumstances.

Regarding consciousness, while there are many different later Buddhist views, the early Indian Buddhism that Śaṅkara likely knew said that consciousness is a stream of momentary

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<sup>35</sup> Menon, *The Mind of Adi Shankaracarya*, 50.

concepts that arise and disappear moment-by-moment, and that nothing persists between any two occasions. For the Advaitins, even though consciousness is an illusion, at its heart lies the manifestation of the pure consciousness of Brahman. This pure source of consciousness is something that Buddhism is completely devoid of. Memory is what ties the past and the present together, and without that element, the Advaitins try to take down the Buddhists by saying that a lack of a witness consciousness makes their system of karma lack a proper foundation upon which to function.

In Buddhism the ego is something that should just be annihilated, which exists simply as a byproduct of delusion and ignorance. However, for Śaṅkara the ego is the seed of the witness consciousness that represents the pure consciousness of Brahman.

For the Buddhists, the belief in an essential nature to things is the ignorance that causes desire and aversion and incites the process of karma and rebirth. Śaṅkara agrees that ignorance is the cause of all suffering, but he says that another consequence of ignorance is that it causes us to miss out on the reality of Brahman which pervades everything, a point that, according to Śaṅkara, is lost on even the Buddha himself.

Finally, the Buddhists posit that upon the removal of ignorance, desire and aversion are uprooted, suffering ends, and nirvana is reached, even though there is no one there to be in nirvana. For Śaṅkara, the removal of avidyā does not lead to nirvana, but rather to vidyā, or pure knowing of the truth of the Self/ Brahman. At the second state for both systems, truth and reality become one and the same. Vidyā however reveals that the Self actually is Brahman, the highest reality.<sup>36</sup>

### Conclusion

On the basis of the four states of being, embedded within the surrounding philosophy of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedantā, it is clear that while there are superficial similarities with Buddhism, the Advaita system is truly unique unto itself. That being said, the fact that Śaṅkara brought dreaming to the forefront of an Indian philosophical system may have been enough to both plant the seed for the use of dreaming as a tool in the manipulation of karma, as the Tibetans later did, as well as to establish scriptural rapport for the inclusion of dreaming in a soteriology.

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<sup>36</sup> K.A. Krishnaswamy Iyer, *Collected Works of K.A. Krishnaswamy Iyer* (Holenarsipur: The Adhyantama Prakasha Press, 1969), 169-176.

Furthermore, the elements of ignorance, transmigratory existence, karma, and so forth, in conjunction with an importance of dreaming all set the stage for the appropriation of the dreaming state in contemplative practice in later spiritual practices.

We spend a third of our life sleeping, and no matter what we do during the day, we always end in the same way. Śaṅkara did not place a great emphasis on the manipulation of action into dharmic and adharmic deeds, e.g. virtuous or non-virtuous actions in order to manipulate the ripening of their results, and because of that his system has always remained somewhat out of reach for the common man. The attainment of vidyā through a simple act of knowing the true reality of Brahman seems almost unattainable, so that it is easy to see why the Tibetans, and also later interpretations of the Vedas, went on to try to control their manifest reality through actions similar to how the Mīmāṃsakas had already done with their use of injunctions.

Śaṅkara truly did lie in the middle between his interlocutors, because he rejected action where they both took it up in different ways. The Mīmāṃsakas used action, or karma, to force the Gods to give them what they wanted, while the Buddhists used action to manipulate the results of their deeds with hopes of the same results. Śaṅkara was a natural genius that is both above and beyond that type of manipulation of his circumstances; however, he did not provide the common man with anything to do. His system, which prescribes knowledge and non-action as the antidote to suffering, is accessible for those who may be talented and already tapped into higher knowledge to some extent, but it leaves something to be desired for the beginner and common man.

When we dream, an entire world manifests and we have an experience. During the dream, we identify ourselves with the subject, and there are other beings in our dreams, as well as a material world which all seem real. Upon awakening we realize that the dream was not real, that is was merely a projection of our own mind. The Tibetans later grasped onto the process of identification with the subject of dreaming, and said that just as we naturally identify ourselves with the subject of the dream, so too should we be able to manipulate the subject by influencing our dream state through the process of lucid dreaming and manipulation of karma. One can then combine lucid dreaming with deity yoga practices in order to firmly identify oneself with the deity.

It has been suggested that the radiance of Brahman at the center of Śaṅkara's philosophy is the seed for tantric deity yoga as a practice that helps to identify the individual self (jiva) with the greater self (ātman), so that one can ultimately see that they are God (Brahman). It may be that the Tibetans took up that line of thinking when tantra passed from India to Tibet, and wholeheartedly developed an intricate system centered around dreaming that leads to the identification of the self with Brahman, an interesting return to the starting point of Śaṅkara's suppositions.



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