THE NATURE OF AVIDYĀ IN
BUDDHISM AND VEDĀNTA

by

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with the nature of ignorance as it was interpreted in the Upaniṣadic tradition, specifically in Advaita Vedānta, and in early and Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially in the Mādhyamika school of Buddhism. The approach is a historical and comparative one. It examines the early thoughts of both the Upaniṣads and Buddhism about avidyā (ignorance), shows how the notion was treated by the more speculative and philosophically oriented schools which based themselves on the early works, and sees how their views differ. The thesis will show that the Vedānta tended to treat avidyā as a topic for metaphysical speculation as the school developed, drifting from its initial existential concerns, while the Mādhyamika remained in contact with the existential concerns evident in the first discourses of the Buddha.

The word "notion" has been chosen for use in referring to avidyā, even though it may have non-intellectual and emotional connotations, to avoid more popular alternatives such as "concept" or "idea". In neither the Upaniṣads, Advaita Vedānta, or Buddhism is ignorance merely a concept or an idea. Only in a secondary sense, in texts and speech, does it become one. Avidyā has more to do with the lived situation in which man finds himself, with the subject-object separation in which he feels he exists, than with
intellectual constructs. Western thought has begun to realize the same with concerns such as being in modern ontology, and has chosen to speak about it in terms of the question of being. Avidyā, however, is not a 'question'. If questions were to be put regarding the nature of avidyā, they would be more of the sort "What is not avidyā?", though even here language bestows a status to it which avidyā does not have.

In considering a work of the Eastern tradition, we face the danger of imposing Western concepts on it. Granted that avidyā is customarily rendered in English as ignorance, the ways in which the East and West view ignorance differ. Pedagogically, the European cultures, grounded in the ancient Greek culture, view ignorance as a lack or an emptiness. A child is ignorant of certain things and the purpose of formal education, in fact if not in theory, is to fill him with enough knowledge so that he can cope with the complexities and the expectations of society. On another level, we feel that study and research will lead to the discovery of solutions, which we now lack, for problems now defying solution.

The East, on the other hand, sees avidyā in a different light. Ignorance isn't a lack, but a presence. Religious and philosophical literature directs its efforts not towards acquiring something new, but at removing the ideas and opinions that individuals have formed about themselves and the world. When that is fully accomplished, say the sages, then Wisdom, which has been obscured by those opinions, will
present itself. Nothing new has to be learned, though we do
have to 'learn' that much.

The growing interest in the West with Eastern religions
and philosophies may, in time, influence our theoretical
and practical approaches to education and learning, not only
in the established educational institutions, but in religious,
psychological, and spiritual activities as well. However,
the requirements of this thesis do not permit a formulation
of revolutionary method or a call to action. It focuses
instead on the textual arguments which attempt to convince
readers that the world in which they take themselves to
exist is not, in essence, real, on the ways in which the
limitations of language are disclosed, and on the provisional
and limited schemes that are built up to help students see
through their ignorance. The metaphysics are provisional
because they act only as spurs and guides. Both the
Upaniṣadic and Buddhist traditions that will be dealt with
here stress that language constantly fails to encompass the
Real. So even terms such as 'the Real', 'Absolute', etc.,
serve only to lead to a transcendent experience.

The sections dealing with the Upaniṣads and Advaita
Vedānta show some of the historical evolution of the notion
of avidyā, how it was dealt with as māyā, and the questions
that arose as to its locus. With Gauḍapāda we see the
beginnings of a more abstract treatment of the topic, and
the influence of Buddhism. Though Śaṅkharā's interest was
primarily directed towards constructing a philosophy to help
others attain mokṣa (liberation), he too introduced technical terminology not found in the works of his predecessors. His work is impressive, but areas of it are incomplete. Numbers of his followers tried to complete the systematic presentation of his insights. Their work focuses on explanations of adhyāsa (superimposition), the locus and object of ignorance, and the means by which Brahman takes itself to be the jīva and the world.

The section on early Buddhism examines avidyā in the context of the four truths, together with duḥkha (suffering), the role it plays in the chain of dependent causation, and the problems that arise with the doctrine of anātman. With the doctrines of early Buddhism as a base, the Mādhyamika elaborated questions that the Buddha had said tended not to edification. One of these had to do with own-being or svabhāva. This serves as a centre around which a discussion of ignorance unfolds, both individual and collective ignorance. There follows a treatment of the cessation of ignorance as it is discussed within this school. The final section tries to present the similarities and differences in the natures of ignorance in the two traditions and discusses the factors responsible for them.
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SECTION I

The Nature of Avidyā in the Upaniṣads

In the Upaniṣads, one finds speculations on the origins of the world, its basic substance, the fate of man after death, and many related questions that enquiring men have asked and have attempted to answer throughout the ages. These works offer modern man an opportunity to see one of the human race's first attempts to answer these questions stripped of the accompaniment of capricious gods, dark, unknown forces, and various other ideas concerning the nature of the world which bring about compliance and submission to fear and ignorance. Here, as in early Greek, Hebraic, and Chinese attempts, man begins to investigate the mysteries of the world with the belief that, ultimately, the answers will not be a threat to him. Even more, he believes that knowledge of the Ultimate will save him from the worldly pains and sufferings that afflict him and will prevent their return. But more astounding than this, especially for a culture that everyday sees the stockpile of knowledge grow and expand at hitherto undreamed of speed, is the belief on the part of these people that they could learn the answers to all the mysteries of the universe, and this, not through a detached, external investigation of the world, but through introspection and direct experience.
The first investigations in the Upaniṣads offered a wide variety of answers. There are instances where the formulations become very abstract, stating that, originally, this world arose from non-being (Taittirīya 2.7; Chāndogya 3.9). Other accounts see the source as being itself (Chāndogya 6.2). As in early Greek philosophy, the basic elements were also posited as world 'stuffs', though always under the sway of Brahman (Brhadāraṇyaka 5.5). But, in time, the view emerged that Brahman itself was the unitary source and foundation of the world. The search for an answer to the question of the origins of named things, what we would call the phenomenal realm, had been driven into the non-perceptible, non-empirical realm, for Brahman is conceived in turn as being ether, the Void (Chānd 4.6.5), and the Self, or Soul, of all things (Brh. 2.1.10).

With the attempt to explain the world as Self, we move closer to the main themes which revolve around the notion of avidyā, for there arises a distinction between the universal Self and the many individual selves. The universal Self is one, serving as the unifying explanation of the world. Yet each individual believes himself to be unique and somehow different from all others, though the essential difference often eludes him. Eventually, however, the apparently different selves were interpreted as being essentially one, Brahman was Ātman. This concluded a process of reduction which had denied the apparent plurality of the world and posited the one Brahman as existing behind the name and form
of the world.

However, equating the one and the many doesn't explain how the many came to be, nor the continuing relationship between Brahman and the world. One attempt at an explanation depicted Brahman in two roles. In a distinction analogous to what Kant calls the noumenal and the phenomenal, the Brhadāranyaka describes the reality of the 'noumenal' Brahman as a razor hidden in a razor case, i.e., in the phenomenal world (1.4.7). The same Upaniṣad states that name and form are the actual, they are the individualized way in which things of the world exist. Yet the actual, or present, veils the Real (Brh. 2.3.1).

The Upaniṣads explain the real nature of Brahman as also being of a greater 'completeness'. The perceived world in the early stages of Upaniṣadic investigation possesses a degree of reality, for man perceives it. But Brahman possesses more 'reality' than the eye can know (Chānd. 3.12.6).

Corresponding to these two Brahmans, or modes of Brahman, are two knowledges, a higher and a lower. The lower includes all sensory and intellectual knowledge, including religious texts that offer instructions on worldly activities. When Saunaka, in the Mundaka Upaniṣad, asks Angiras by understanding of what did the world become understood, he replies:

There are two knowledges to be known - as indeed the knowers of Brahma are wont to say: a higher (para) and also
As Hume points out in his introduction to The Thirteen Principal Upanisads, the doctrine of two Brahmans soon underwent change in the face of the strain of the repeated axiom that Brahman was only one. And the empirical world, once interpreted as being a level of reality, was explained away as only appearance. But then the problem arose as to the nature of that ignorance (avidyā) which accepted the apparent as real. In the Brhadārayyaka (2.1), where Gargya, a brahmin, asks Ajātaśatru, a kṣatriya, for instruction, in the Chāndogya (6.1-6), where Śvetaketu receives instruction from his father, and in the Kātha Upanisad with Naciketas, the passages emphasize the belief that ignorance is a function of the individual, that it is, in a manner of speaking, one’s own responsibility. And if one is fortunate enough, the person deluded by ignorance can gain knowledge of Brahman through the guidance of a guru who himself knows Brahman. The student-teacher relationship in the Kātha Upanisad is that between Naciketas and Yama, the god of death, yet a teacher nevertheless.

Widely opposite and asunder are these two Ignorance (avidyā) and what is known as knowledge (vidyā). I think Naciketas (is) desirous of obtaining knowledge. Many desires rend thee not (2.1.4).

But in some of the same Upanisads there exists the expressed opinion that Brahman, not the individual, the jīva which will become the locus of ignorance in some of the
later schools of Vedānta, is responsible for the apparent world and for error and ignorance. The word māyā, used first in the Brhadāraṇyaka (2.5.19), originally meant the "magical powers" through which Indra manifested himself as a plurality. Later, in the Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad (4.9-10), Brahman becomes an illusion maker, the entire world being the illusion that he wields.

Deussen, in his The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads, states that the use of māyā in the sense of illusion first occurs in the Śvetāsvatara. He goes on to argue that it isn't simply a "secondary speculation". Yājñavalkya, for example, elaborates the view that the ātman is sole reality, the sustainer of the universe as well as the knowing subject. In this respect, Deussen clearly disagrees with Hume, who believes that the doctrine of illusion was the speculative outcome of the inconsistencies inherent in the theory of a higher and a lower Brahman. Hume also believes that the 'thinkers' of the Upaniṣads fail, that they sought for the true nature of the world but arrived at "... (on) the one hand an illusory world, and on the other hand an unknowable reality."³

The contradictory views of the Upaniṣads on Brahman and avidyā, among other topics, frustrated the attempts of commentators to define a consistent and unified philosophy which was felt to exist within the texts. In an attempt to bring some order to the confusion, Bādarāyana composed the Brahma-sūtras, a compilation of utterances gleaned from the
Upaniṣads and supposedly arranged in such a way as to demonstrate the basic unity of the works. Yet the extreme brevity of the aphorisms defies casual interpretation. It itself gave rise to conflicting interpretations. Nārāyana Paṇḍit, in the Madhva-vijaya-bhāva-prakāśikā, gives the names of twenty-one commentators who preceeded Madhva, but only three have come down to us, Śaṅkara, Bhāskara, and Ramānuja. And these dramatically illustrate the way in which even an attempt at a presentation of coherence can go astray, for the commentaries on the Brahma-sūtras advocate philosophies ranging from Śaṅkara's non-dualism to Madhva's radical dualism.

But the time span between the writing of the Sūtras and the most important commentary, that of Śaṅkara, is from 400 to 600 years. Before Śaṅkara wrote his commentary, Gauḍapāda had composed his own important works.
SECTION II

The Nature of Avidyā in Gauḍapāda

Legend has it that Gauḍapāda was Śaṅkara's teacher's teacher, but his place in Vedāntic literature remains the subject of debate because of some supposedly Buddhist leanings. His use of accepted Buddhist terms such as dhatu, vijñāna, and saṃsvāti, his mention of the Buddha (section IV, karika 99 of the Gaudapāda-Kārikā), the use of the fire-brand simile, passages similar to Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā's (IV, 4, for example), all these factors have caused some to claim that Gauḍapāda was a Buddhist.

If the latter portion of the work does have a Buddhist flavour, Gauḍapāda begins in an orthodox manner by expounding the one Paramātman. Only because of different limitations does the Ātman see itself as separate from the world. But in essence, things are intrinsically one and undivided. Gauḍapāda approaches avidyā with an analysis of the different states within which the jīva, or the individual, functions.

The individual has three dispositions which are describable, the waking state (Viśva), the sleeping and dreaming state (Taijasa), and the state of deep sleep (Prājñā). But when the all-pervading self does not function within any of these states, then it is the Turiya, the fourth state beyond all dichotomies. In one of his favourite
similes, Gauḍapāda compares the world to a dream. Believing that it exists apart from us constitutes delusion. The dream disappears on waking, re-absorbed into the one Ātman. And just as with a dream, the world is of our own creation, one that also loses its objective, separate nature when we 'awake' to the true Ātman.

In interpreting the ignorance of the Ātman about its own nature as illusion (māyā), Gauḍapāda favours the later Upaniṣadic meaning rather than the earlier one, the one viewing māyā as illusion rather than "magical power". He writes:

(Ātman) is imagined to be Prāna (life) etc. and these innumerable entities. This (is) the Māyā of the shining one (Ātman) by which (he) himself has been deluded. (II.19)

Māyā in this instance may mean magical powers. Yet these magical powers don't have connotations of delusion, and this delusion is expicitely given in the text as the state within which the Ātman perceives the things of the world as individual.

How, then, does Ātman come to mistakenly believe that not only it but all other things in the world exist separately and in their own right? Gauḍapāda uses the analogy of ether and earthen jars to describe the mistake of individuality. Individual shapes appear when a jar encloses ether (ākāśa). Analogously, limitations bound the Ātman. An individual can realize his non-differentiated nature only by breaking
through to the *Turīya* state.

Gauḍapāda also claims that no thing is ever born, that cause and effect are illusory, and that the ultimate nature of the universe is non-dualistic (IV, 22). Metaphorically, the production of the world is likened to the appearance of illusory lines and circles when a glowing fire-brand moves in the darkness.

As the fire-brand not shaking, presenting no appearance (is) unoriginated, so is the vijñāna not shaking, presenting no appearance, unoriginated. (II, 48)

Those critics who were to dispute Gauḍapāda's orthodoxy and his faithfulness to the Upaniṣads used statements such as the preceeding one in their attacks, for the belief that the world is a manifestation of mind was the central thesis of the Buddhist Yogācāra school. If Gauḍapāda based his writings on the Upaniṣads, then he is beginning to tread on shifting philosophical ground. If he had confined his theories on the nature of one's ignorance to a mode of the vijñāna, then, even though the terminology resembles that used by the Buddhists, the theoretical stance could be reconciled with the Upaniṣadic one. Both advocate a non-dualism, and Gauḍapāda does stress the non-dualism of Brahman rather than the vijñāna. Perhaps R. D. Karmarkar is right when he insists that Gauḍapāda used Buddhist terminology only to fight the Buddhist schools. But when he combines his theories of the agitation of the vijñāna with those of non-origination, he opens himself to charges of advancing Buddhist views.
Uddālaka had told Śvetāketa in the Chāndogya: "That thou art", Brahman was his essence. But Gauḍapāda writes:

... neither one bound down (to this samsāra), nor again aspirant (or, one working) for salvation; neither one desirous of salvation, nor again one emancipated - thus (is) this highest truth. (II,32)

The outstanding theme of the Upaniṣads is the existence of a Self behind the darkness of ignorance. Gauḍapāda here denies the existence of any kind of self. Nothing has originated, so nothing can be. This, as we shall see, is the crucial point from which Nāgārjuna started his dialectical attack on the dharma theory and proposed that everything is basically devoid (sūnya) of substantiality. N. K. Devaraja, in discussing the connection between Gauḍapāda and Śaṅkara, speculates that the fourth section of the Karikas was written by a Buddhist, not by Gauḍapāda. However, whether the last section was written by Gauḍapāda or not, the work as a whole was to influence the philosophies of Śaṅkara and his disciples.

What, then, has Gauḍapāda achieved, as a Buddhist or not, which the seers of the Upaniṣads had not?

With respect to method, Gauḍapāda abandons the dialogue and dramatic settings of the Upaniṣads and presents a philosophical statement on the nature of Ātman, māyā, etc. The discussion of these and other topics has evolved into a presentation of themes and ideas, with similes and metaphors used for illustrating certain points. The Karikas are not
concerned, as some portions of the Upaniṣads and almost all of the Brahmanas were, with the discussion of correct dogma or ritual procedure. The method is one of direct presentation of views, emphasizing the possibility of understanding Brahman, perhaps not by the intellect, but through it. That is, the intellect is used as a vehicle for approaching the understanding of Brahman to a greater extent than was done in the Upaniṣads. Also, to help achieve this end, Gauḍapāda has stripped his presentation of much of the esoteric symbolism found in the Upaniṣads. The Kārikās cannot lay claim to being secret doctrines. They present as straightforward an account of Ātman, māyā, etc., as is possible with words, and attempt to help dispell man's ignorance in as useful a way that language can accomplish, by stating the theory and recommending the necessary course of action.

Drawing for his writings on a profound knowledge of both the Upaniṣads and Buddhism, Gauḍapāda emphasized the ignorance of Brahman instead of individual ignorance. Technically, only one ignorance 'exists'; but in the world of duality, he chooses to concentrate on Brahman's self-delusion. The method effectively demonstrates his belief that the jīva, as an individual apart from the world, does not exist. Ātman mistakenly believes itself to be a jīva, so, to speak of the individual's ignorance as, say, opposed to another's delusions, would not only be nonsensical, but it also postpones the insight into one's true nature.
By dealing with the ignorance of Brahman, Gauḍapāda depicts māyā as an almost impersonal element, though personal and impersonal have no ultimate meaning in such a context, an element which forms the substance of the world and prevents Atman from knowing itself. This presents difficulties, for if ignorance is a "stuff", its removal by the human being then appears impossible.

But counterposed to this approach is one that could be called a more 'psychological' one. Ignorance, manifested as the world, is a projection of Atman. It is only a mode of Atman. Since the world is a mode of the Self, the dual is a manifestation of what is intrinsically unitary, and ignorance remains essentially related to knowledge. All entities "... are well ascertained to be Adhibuddhas (enlightened from the very beginning)." (IV,92)

By saying that all entities are enlightened from the beginning and are, by nature, at rest, Gauḍapāda makes no distinction between what one knows and what one is. Categories of knowing and being evaporate in the non-differentiation of Atman. Gauḍapāda agrees in this respect with the Upaniṣadic maxim that he who knows Brahman becomes Brahman. But if, at the same time, nirvāṇa is non-originated from the very beginning, one 'is' not. A philosophy that sees the entire world as lacking a base to which language can refer, cannot admit of any existing thing. Here is one of the difficulties of any study of Gauḍapāda, as it will be later with Nāgārjuna.
Another involves Gauḍapāda's treatment of the individual. Though his explanation of ignorance might be theoretically convincing, it doesn't demolish separateness. Neither does the enlightenment of one jīva do away with the ignorance of others. With liberation, "others" do not exist any more for the liberated one. But for one still bound down, this isn't so. The problem in studying Gauḍapāda in this area is not that he offers no solution, but that he indeed tries to. On the relationship of perceived and perceiver, he writes:

They (the entities) are all capable of being beheld (only) by the mind of the waking; (they) do not exist apart from it (the mind). (IV,66)

This raises the question of the nature of the perceiving mind, whether it has an independent existence, or is itself dependent on being perceived.

They (are) both capable of being perceived by each other; then what is it (that is real)? Nothing is the answer (ucyate). Both, void of characteristics, are perceived by its thought itself. (IV,67)

Transposed into a Berkeleyan context, I exist because other perceive me, but others exist because I perceive them. Somehow, things exist independently, and somehow, not. For the purposes of intellectual comprehension, the intelligible limits seem to have been reached centuries earlier in the Upaniṣads, where contradictory statements try to describe the reality of Brahman. The attempt to picture a plurality of jīvas, essentially unreal on the mundane level, maintaining their existence as the result of a mutually reciprocal
ignorance, can only succeed from a 'higher' point of view, or from a more fully developed philosophy. A large part of Śaṅkara's work was oriented towards such an attempt, and while he would make innovations in terminology and method, he would also continue Gauḍapāda's work. Though Gauḍapāda did change the method of enquiring into the nature of māyā, introduced a more detailed analysis of the self, and treated māyā both as a substance and as a mode of Ātman, most of his work is grounded in the Upaniṣads. If the last portion of the Kārikās is excluded as being of doubtful origin, the remaining three are very orthodox. Ignorance conceals man's true nature from himself. Furthermore, Ātman is taken to be not just the self of man, but the Self of all things. In this Gauḍapāda agrees with the Upaniṣads, and Śaṅkara follows him.
SECTION III

The Nature of Avidyā in Śaṅkara and the Commentators

For Śaṅkara, as for Gauḍapāda, the Real is non-dual, homogeneous, and destitute of qualities. He believes that only the one Brahman truly exists, and that it can be described provisionally as being pure Consciousness and Being. But here again one encounters the problem of the multiplicity of the world. If Brahman is homogeneous, how is it that the world appears to us a plurality, and in a constant state of flux? Śaṅkara too, as did the seers of the Upaniṣads, believes that the world appearance comes about through māyā or avidyā. But his approach to the interpretation of the nature of that ignorance is a more developed one than that of the Upaniṣads.

In his preamble to the Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya, Śaṅkara begins his analysis of ignorance with a distinction the subject and the object. The important point here is that the subject is not the individual jīva, but proves, on ultimate analysis, to be the Self, Ātman, or Brahman. The objective world includes all entities of a non-intelligent nature. So, Intelligence also signifies Brahman's nature, but it does so only in a provisional sense.
Brahman is described by means of name, form and action imposed on It, in such terms as, 'Knowledge, Bliss, Brahman' (II.ix.28), and 'Pure Intelligence' (II.iv.12), 'Brahman' and 'Atman'. When, however, we wish to describe Its true nature, free from all differences due to limiting adjuncts, then it is an utter impossibility. Then there is only one way left, viz. to describe It as 'Not this, not this'. . . .

However, for purposes of discussion on the vyāvahārika plane, Brahman is described as non-differentiated, uniform, and unaffected by sorrows. But because of Nescience (avidyā), it mistakes itself to be something it is not. Śaṅkara's term for that mistake, i.e., for the ascription of characteristics to an entity which it doesn't possess, is adhyāsa. The accepted translation for that term has become superimposition. The Self superimposes onto itself characteristics of the sphere of objects. Śaṅkara defines adhyāsa as "... the apparent presentation of the attributes of one thing in another thing."

But if the Self remains essentially free from suffering and all objective predicates, Śaṅkara's definition of superimposition has an apparent weakness, for the Self doesn't have any thing-like qualities. Śaṅkara replies that if one can't say that the Self has object-like qualities, one is also prevented from saying that it is "... non-object in the absolute sense." Experience shows that the notion of Ego has the Self as object, and that the existence of the Self can be known intuitively and immediately. To
support his claim that characteristics need not be imposed on what is conventionally accepted as an object, Śaṅkara offers the example of the colour blue superimposed on the materially non-existent ether.

Śaṅkara's firm stand in the Upaniṣadic tradition is evident from his treatment of Brahman, and it reinforces itself, despite his new technical language, in the theme of unity between knowing and being. They are not separate for him. For practical purposes, however, a discussion of ignorance must have two facets, one dealing mainly with epistemological concerns, the other with ontological ones.

Gauḍapāda had emphasized delusion and ignorance as māyā. As such, ignorance lost its personal aspect, and understandably so, for in such a context, where the individual sees himself as removed from the totality of existence, the personal is a product of ignorance. Māyā becomes a universal, or cosmic, principle. The entire cosmos deludes itself as to its true nature. For Śaṅkara, avidyā and adhyāsa become the key words, and he approaches avidyā from the realm of the individual.

For as long as a person\textsuperscript{11} has not reached the true knowledge of the Self, so long it does not enter his mind that the world of effects with its means and objects of right knowledge and its results of actions is untrue.\textsuperscript{12}

This means of dealing with avidyā indicates a pragmatic side to Śaṅkara's work. While he intensified the intellectual investigation into avidyā, the primary purpose of the
investigation was to help lead men to liberation (mokṣa), not to construct a complete and consistent philosophical system. Gauḍapāda certainly also had this in mind. But while he attempts to show man what he intrinsically is, talking of the one shining Ātman, Šaṅkara begins from the lived situation of man in the dualistic world and attempts to destroy man's ignorance by demonstrating the shortcomings and inconsistencies of his habitual views of himself and the world.

In the Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya (II.i.27), Šaṅkara writes that the avidyā which gives rise to and perpetuates duality "... originates entirely from speech only", that is, Šaṅkara here tends to the early Upaniṣadīc position of personal responsibility for ignorance. Speech constructs the world of name and form which the Brhadāranyaka expounded. Speech also belongs to the lower level of knowledge.

(Two) kinds of knowledge are enjoined there (in the Upaniṣad), a lower and a higher one. Of the lower one it is said that it comprises the Rigveda and so on, and then the text continues, 'The higher knowledge is that by which the Indestructible is apprehended. For the distinction of lower and higher knowledge is made on account of the diversity of their results, the former leading to mere worldly exaltation, the latter to absolute bliss'. (B.S.E., I.ii.21)

If Šaṅkara admits that two levels of truth exist, and if he asserts that the lower one is basically oriented around words, he places the validity of the orthodox means of knowledge in doubt, for it follows that they all belong to the realm of avidyā.
In his *Introduction to Śaṅkara's Theory of Knowledge*, Devaraja states that the philosopher was averse to *tarka*, i.e., to dialectical argument and speculative reasoning.\textsuperscript{13} And if he discards this type of knowing, then he is interpreting several of the *pramāṇas*, the orthodox means of knowing, as at best ineffective, and at worst totally wrong. And, in fact, in the introduction to the *Bhāṣya* we find:

(\textit{The} operation of the *pramāṇas* presupposes the existence of a knowing personality which latter depends upon the self's erroneous identification of itself with body, senses, etc.\textsuperscript{14})

If the initial presupposition is erroneous, the knowledge that the *jiva* acquires must also be wrong. If this knowledge can't be said to be true in an ultimate sense, is it of any use or value in overcoming the basic ignorance man has about Brahman and its true nature? Śaṅkara's views on this are hard to discover at first because he gives apparently conflicting statements on that account. In I.i.2 of the *Bhāṣya* he writes that the "... enquiry into Brahman, unlike the enquiry into the dharma, admits of other *pramāṇas* besides the Scriptures. Here Scripture, intuition, etc., all are to be used according to the occasion." In his more orthodox moods he declares that Brahman can be known only through the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{15} And in some passages he goes so far as to say that Brahman can't be known through the sacred texts.

The aim of the *Sastra* is the removal of distinctions created by avidyā or nescience; its purport is not to represent Brahman as 'this' or 'that' object. (B.S.E., I.i.4)
The last passage doesn't present as great a problem as first might appear, for it perhaps emphasizes the denial of Brahman's object nature rather than his knowability. Once this is done, no pramāṇas, which function on the empiricoc-intellectual level, can gain access to it. But the other statements present more difficulties.

In order to resolve them we must remember that, for Śaṅkara, the individual and Brahman are identical in their essence. "(The) individual and the highest soul differ in name only." (B.S.B., I.iv.22) Avidyā separates the two. But knowledge of Brahman differs from empirical knowing. In the early Upaniṣads, the sages had denied empirical and intellectual content to this Ultimate, stating that it could not be seen, nor heard, nor understood, the last phrase meaning that it could not be understood intellectually. Empirical and intellectual knowledge functions within limits and categories. Knowledge of the Self is directly intuitive. Because the distinction between the two is so radical, the categorial, when compared to the intuitive, is as a dream compared to the waking state, or as what in everyday life is ignorance when compared to ordinary knowledge.

The peculiar epistemological contribution of Śaṅkara is that knowledge of the former kind (intellectual) leads to knowledge of the latter type (intuitive).16

The pramāṇas have a role to play in providing knowledge of Brahman, but an unusual one. They fulfill their function when they can no longer function; their work ends when the
Self has an intuitive self-vision that involves a leap from the categorial to the intuitive mode of knowing.

While it does not offer itself to empirical verification, anubhava, direct intuitive experience, remains an experience, though of a different order. And it is precisely this experience that is the goal of all knowing. Hence, though Brahman transcends the pramāṇas, falling outside any limiting qualifications, it does not transcend experience itself.

Errors occur within each of the ways of knowing accepted as valid. Yet the existence of an objective world which countless beings accept as real, if it is ultimately unreal, speaks of a radically different level of error. In considering this other level of avidyā, we turn to the ontological and metaphysical aspect of avidyā, remembering that such a categorization has meaning only on the vyāvahārika level.

The Self is always homogeneous and infinite. When it manifests itself as a plurality, it does so through māyā. Commentators treat māyā as either a principle of illusion or a quasi-material stuff out of which Brahman constructs the world. From the ultimate viewpoint, māyā is an illusion. But even Śaṅkara, when taking his stance in the lower level of truth, states that Brahman is the material cause of the universe. When Brahman, in conjunction with māyā, becomes the material cause of the universe, it is commonly called Īśvara. "Brahman is to be acknowledged as the material cause as well as the operative cause," he states, providing further arguments through the commentaries on sūtras.
twenty-four to twenty-eight. By "material", Śaṅkara doesn't mean a matter existing independently of a soul or a spirit. It is that by virtue of which the world exists.

Commentators have ascribed a two-fold nature to this ignorance. The first, called āvarana śakti, conceals the truth. Ignorance becomes not the magical power of the Upaniṣads, but the principle that breaks up the unity of perceived sensations, separating them into subject and object. Iyer describes the operation as a breaking up of a whole and a reconstruction that produces a world characterized by infinite variety and constant change. The reconstructive ability of ignorance is called vikṣeṇa śakti. The result is not a total absence of knowledge, a negativity, but a positive entity, a bhāva padārtha. For the purposes of our discussion, this reconstruction is also superimposition, for the reality is never destroyed altogether, it is merely misinterpreted. When someone takes that misinterpretation to be reality, he clings to a self-made illusion as if it were the truth.

This superimposition learned men consider to be Nescience (āvidyā), and the ascertainment of the true nature of that which is (the Self) by means of the discrimination of that (which is superimposed on the Self) they call knowledge (vidyā). (B.S.B., Preamble)

Superimposition gives rise to the distinctions of everyday life, and Śaṅkara believes that even writings as exalted as the Vedas, when they presuppose caste, cause and effect, and doer and action, have as their basis this primal āvidyā.
Brahman's two roles as material and efficient cause of the world derive from the double aspect of māyā. As the pure consciousness veiled by the vikṣepa śakti, Brahman is the operative cause mentioned in the commentary. As the infinite which is covered by the āvaraṇa śakti, Brahman becomes the matter or stuff of the world and its jīvas. Commentators use the example of a spider making a web to illustrate how one entity can be both the efficient and material cause of something, for the spider constructs the web by himself from himself.

The creative power of avidyā possesses three constitutive characteristics modelled on the Sāmkhya division, sattva, rajas, and tamas. From the association of these with the creative power come all the subtle and gross elements. The Vedānta-paribhāṣā traces the development of worldly entities from the combination and recombination of the five subtle elements.20

In the apparent transformation and confusion of the real and unreal, Brahman remains essentially unaffected. The upādhis, the adjuncts, the mental and sensory limitations through which the mind establishes a knowing relationship with the apparent world, only appear to break up the world's primal unity. When they are removed, the many-sided illusion of the world merges into the one Brahman. Man and the world become what they always intrinsically were.

But until then, polarities exist between subject and object, finite and infinite, jīva and Brahman. Though
commentators busied themselves with speculations as to how avidyā apparently split Brahman into jīva and īśvara, it is enough here to say that if matter is taken entirely and objectively as a limitation of Brahman, Brahman becomes the world; if taken in a partial sense, it becomes the jīva. Brahman disposes itself as the world and the individual, then ignores, or remains ignorant of, the disposition. From this come all the distinctions of the world, having no existence in reality, being merely the extrapolation of a primary error.

The self-imposed limitations of Brahman that produce distinctions, the upādhis, are customarily translated as adjuncts. But the term has a number of meanings. We have already seen that it can mean limitation or qualification. But it can also be translated as appearance, disguise, or phantom, terms that denote falsity or unreality rather than partiality. It can also mean substitution, thereby acquiring connotations of an exchange of one thing for another. All of these meanings are present when Brahman is viewed through the upādhis as jīva. The absolute, infinite nature of Brahman remains behind the narrow and restricted view of itself which the jīva constructs through its intellect and senses. Ignorance causes a substitution of infinite qualities for finite characteristics and an exchange of its true nature for a false one.

These defining characteristics also extend to the social determinates by which man orients himself in society.
Social status, family position, national identity, etc., are all artificial limitations that enclose the infinite human essence within conventional restraints. They help achieve a smooth process of social interaction but cloak the boundless nature of the individual.

Within a phenomenological existential context, the discovery of one's upādhis is the discovery, as Heidegger puts it, that one is 'thrown' into the world. Vedānta explains this 'thrown-ness' as the manifestation of karma, the result of this life of actions in past lives. But whereas Heidegger believes that this 'thrown-ness' of Dasein into its 'there' is a finding of Dasein in its being, or a deliverance of Dasein to the facticity of its being, Vedānta believes that rebirth in the world arises and continues because of clinging to illusory and limiting notions of what one truly is.

Economic and historical analyses of the human being, such as Marx attempted, for example, also make use of what are, for the Vedāntin, essentially non-real determinates. Economics, class distinctions, and the unfolding of history all belong to the lower level of truth. A view of man in these terms is limited and, ultimately, untrue. It assumes the existence of a material world within which change takes place. That world, say the Advaितins, is not dead matter, but Brahman. The polarity and conflict between self and other, or between various classes, is only partially real.
One of the implications of the polarity concerns the arising of ignorance. It makes no sense to ask how ignorance came to be in such a situation because it presupposes an already existing configuration into which avidyā 'came'. But the world, the individual, and ignorance 'come into being' simultaneously. One doesn't precede another for all are the same error perceived from different ends of the stick. St. Augustine had analogous ideas on the nature of time. Time and the universe come into existence simultaneously, so it is senseless to ask what God was doing before He created the universe. There was no 'before' with respect to the Creation because there was no time. Likewise, there is no separate world or jīva apart from avidyā. Furthermore, avidyā, for Śaṅkara, cannot even be said to come into being, for it is anādi, beginningless. The world process is the natural series whose origin cannot be determined.

Considering the great importance of avidyā in Śaṅkara's philosophy, it is interesting to see his preference for the term adhyāsa, and how little time he spends on avidyā itself. There is also little effort to deal with the logical dilemma introduced with the notion. In short, the dilemma is that, if avidyā is real, then monism is untenable. If avidyā is unreal, the doctrine of its existence, in whatever mode, is undercut, and the phenomenal reality of the world is unintelligible.

The logical difficulty arises from an attempt to incorporate avidyā's characteristics as experienced from
both the vyāvahārika and pāramārthika levels into one or the other of the two. Speaking in terms that suggest an either/or solution shows that the speaking itself remains grounded in vyavahāraḥ. Ingalls, writing on Śaṅkara's treatment of the question of whose is avidyā, disagrees with Arapura in his belief that, for Śaṅkara, avidyā 'resides' in the persons who are deluded, feeling that Śaṅkara avoids the dilemma. Furthermore, Ingalls contends that Śaṅkara does not set up a new modality to do away with the dilemma.

If that had indeed been Śaṅkara's purpose in writing about avidyā, then he failed in his task. But as Ingalls later writes in the same article, "... Śaṅkara's approach to truth is psychological and religious. His interest in metaphysics and logic is always subordinated to the center of his attention." Even that statement misses the point, for Śaṅkara's interest lay in the way to liberation rather than in psychology or religion.

But Śaṅkara did contribute to the tendency to philosophize and deliberate critically about avidyā, mokṣa, Brahman, etc. And if he was not primarily interested in constructing a consistent system which exhaustively explained avidyā, some of his followers were.

One of the major areas of contention and deliberation centered on the question "Whose is avidyā?" We have seen that ignorance is considered to be a positive, or quasi-positive, entity, not a negativity. It is in association with ignorance as māyā that Brahman disposes itself as the
world and the jīva. A discussion of the nature of ignorance would include in it the problem of the 'location' of this ignorance.

One school, the Bhāmatī, named after a work of the same name by Vācaspati Miśra, believed that the individual was the locus (āśraya) of ignorance, for it didn't make any sense to ascribe ignorance to Brahman, that upon whose realization ignorance was done away with. The Bhāmatī school also argued that there had to be a plurality of loci, for when one person attained enlightenment, not all did. Though there might exist an all-inclusive ignorance (mūlāvidyā), there also had to be private or individual ignorance. Each individual then had his own experiential 'universe', though solipsism is ruled out because of the underlying unity of Brahman.

Maṇḍana Miśra holds to the view that ignorance resides in the individual. In the Brahma-siddhi he writes:

It is true (that the jīva and the supreme Self (Ātman) are the same); but only the individual soul which is in association with avidyā is what is known directly (in our day-to-day experience).25

But, while he believes that the way to liberation is through the knowledge of Brahman, he retains the old brahmanic belief that ritual action or sacrifice is also efficacious. His stance is a tenuous one, for he himself asks:

What for should one who knows the highest Self which is the highest bliss which is one and non-dual, undertake any action? And how
could he undertake any action?
For, he has all his desires
fulfilled, and there is the
absence of the means of action.26

In response to this problem, Maṇḍana Miśra developed
a theory concerning the nature of avidyā in which one's
delusions were not completely done away with at the insight
into the Self. Some of them continue, like the illusion of
a double moon when one knows intellectually that there is
only one. Sacrifice gradually wears down these continuing
illusions and completely removes them.

Sacrifice also acts much the same way in this theory
as did the pramanas in Śaṅkara's scheme. It helps remove
delusive notions about oneself, preparing the way for the
experience of Brahman.27

Vācaspati Miśra also argued that avidyā must reside
in a plurality of individual jīvas. But here too are the
problems of the arising of jīvas, the superimposition of
object qualities on a non-object, and the relationship between
the real and unreal. Vācaspati Miśra deals with the problem
by talking of two kinds of realities. He ascribes phenomenal
reality to that which is superimposed, and absolute reality
to that onto which adjuncts are imposed. "What was seen
before, though real in its own nature, is yet, as superimposed,
indeterminable and hence unreal."28 As in the case of nacre
or shell being mistaken for silver, the silver, seen before,
is phenomenally real and superimposed on the absolutely real
nacre. With jīvas, the unreal, limiting conditions, such as
intellect and sensory impressions, are superimposed on the absolutely real Self.

The Bhāmatī followers were faced with the difficulty of the inter-relationship of the two reals. Rather than dealing in depth with the problem, they took recourse in the workings of ignorance. Because of the "... particular defining conditions posited by indeterminable, beginningless Nescience, such as the intellect ..., he (the Self) appears as if defined." But in 'reality', he is not an enjoyer, doer, or any other limited entity.

The followers of the Vivaraṇa school, among them Padmapāda, and Śrī Suresvara, differed from those of the Bhāmatī with respect to both the locus of ignorance and the way in which the jīva arose.

The Bhāmatī had argued for a theory of jīva formation stressing limitation, the limitations being the adjuncts, and tried to explain the plurality of jīvas and how the jīva was a locus of ignorance in this way. The followers of the Vivaraṇa school opted for a theory of reflectionism, and argued that Brahman was the locus of ignorance, with the individual self merely a reflection of it.

Padmapāda argues this point in the Pañcapādikā. He acknowledges the orthodox Advaita doctrine that knowledge of Brahman is the answer to the problem of ignorance and suffering present in the world. Ignorance lies in the belief that one is a doer and enjoyer separate from the fruits of one's actions. But in reality, "... that Jīva
is non-distinct from Brahman,\textsuperscript{30} and sufferings are unreal, ceasing when one attains \textit{jñāna}, or knowledge. The Vivaraṇa school developed a terminology to explain the apparent existence of the individual. The \textit{jīva} is a reflection or \textit{pratibimba} of the original prototype (\textit{bimba}), i.e., Brahman or Pure Consciousness.

\begin{quote}
(The) individual soul (\textit{jīva}) which is the position of the \textit{image} (\textit{pratibimba}) is of the nature of Brahman occupying the position of the object.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

The reflected image is identical with the object.

But doesn't this leave the question of a plurality of \textit{jīvas} unanswered, for how could the single Self, if it be identical with the \textit{jīva}, manifest itself in its wholeness in two or more separate 'regions', those 'regions' being the \textit{jīvas}? The Vivaraṇa school answers that the presence of objects in distinct locations has no absolute reality, so that the problem is a non-existent one. It remains a problem only if one admits that empirical knowledge has absolute validity, which the Advaitins do not. "The appearance of the object as distinct is the display of \textit{māyā} and as is well known there is nothing incongruous to \textit{māyā}."\textsuperscript{32} Uniformity, bliss, consciousness, and non-change characterize the essential nature of Brahman. Padmapāda states explicitly in the \textit{Pañcarātikā} that Brahman does not manifest itself as self-shining intelligence because of

\begin{quote}
. . . the obstructions caused by the potency of nescience which is existent therein (in Brahman) and is beginningless.
\end{quote}
Hence it (primal nescience) obstructs the manifestation of the real nature of Brahman in the inner self (jiva) and it becomes the cause of the appearance of something other than its nature, like the ego-notion . . . .

This corresponds to the orthodox definition of superimposition given by Śaṅkara as the apprehension of something in another thing.

Yet it must be Brahman who is deluded. The Vivaraṇa school argues that the jīva must be identical with Brahman or the notion of avidyā as an entity capable of concealment wouldn't make sense. It then falls back on the authoritative-ness of śruti to say that if Brahman and jīva weren't identical, the teachings of identity would be purposeless. Since the Vedas can't be wrong, it follows that the identity of Brahman and jīva must be accepted as the underlying substratum of the illusion of innumerable souls.

Śrī Suresvara, who until recently was also thought to be Maṇḍana Miśra, also believes that ignorance must reside in Brahman, though unlike him, Śrī Suresvara doesn't make the assertion that avidyā could be removed through ritual action. Only vidyā, or jñāna, gained through reading the Scriptures, could dissipate ignorance. And, for this to be true, he argued, the jīva and Brahman must be one. If they were different, neither knowledge nor actions, as the Mīmāṃsākās believed, could lead to salvation.
Suresvara had some of the clearest arguments in early Advaita literature for the hypothesis that Brahman must be the locus of ignorance. He begins by saying that ignorance must exist somewhere, not in a void. It must then be in either the Self or the not-Self. By not-Self he means the illusory products of ignorance, the most important one here being the ego or jīva. But it is accepted that the jīva is ignorance, the subjective pole of the previously mentioned I and not-I configuration springing from primal ignorance. And ignorance cannot reside in ignorance. Also, if ignorance were to reside in the jīva, there would exist a radical separation between ignorance and knowledge, and salvation would be impossible. But ignorance depends on knowledge, if only by virtue of negating it. So the philosopher concludes that "... it is the Self alone which is both the āsraya and viṣaya (object) of avidyā."34

There remains the matter of the compatibility of ignorance with Brahman. The Bhāmatī contended that ignorance could not reside in that which removes ignorance. Śrī Suresvara believes that ignorance is compatible with Brahman. From the point of view of the higher level of knowledge, no ignorance exists. Only because of the ignorance which one possesses in the lower level do the problems of knower, known, locus, and object of ignorance arise. With mokṣa, we come to see that, in essence, there never was any ignorance in Brahman.
Because of its strict adherence to the notion of a non-dualistic metaphysics, with all its implications for the notion of ignorance, the Vivaraṇa school maintained a greater following than did the Bhāmatī school. By stating that, in some way, Brahman deceived itself, the followers of the Vivaraṇa continued the Upaniṣadic dictum that Brahman was the illusion wielder, and the world the objects of the illusion. This, together with other beliefs which the seers of the Upaniṣads first expounded, create both the strengths and weaknesses of Śaṅkara's philosophy and the works of the commentators. They provide the strengths in that Śaṅkara begins work with a metaphysical system that has laid down the basic tenets of its schematic and asks for a more systematic expansion. Śaṅkara agrees that Brahman exists, that Brahman can be 'found' behind the veil of māyā, that it creates the world in conjunction with māyā, that there are two levels of truth or reality, and that, from the ultimate point of view, all is One. But this very acceptance of the orthodox doctrines, and the desire of the philosophers to make them more intellectually comprehensible, leads intellectual activity to lose sight of the main intent of the doctrines. In the development presented so far, we can see a drift from the concrete situations of the Upaniṣads to the highly speculative arguments of the commentators. Within this development, avidyā changes from an existential dilemma to a point of contention in philosophical disputes. While its existence in the lower level of reality remains unchallenged,
more attention is given in the speculations to its nature rather than to the method of its removal. Ways are sought to clearly explain what is accepted on faith. It is as if the later commentators believe that a successful philosophical methodology will be sufficient to remove ignorance, and that a precise formulation of the nature of ignorance is indispensable for liberation. Buddhism in both its early and later phases differs from Advaita Vedānta on precisely these assumptions.
SECTION IV

Avidyā in Early Buddhism

Because we will deal with two divisions of Buddhism, the primitive or original teachings, and the more philosophical and dialectical writings of Nāgārjuna, some general comments regarding the main differences will be made, for the different concerns of the eras will influence their treatment of avidyā.

From a philosophical perspective, the original teachings concerned themselves primarily with soteriological matters. Though all of Buddhism is essentially a teaching of enlightenment and liberation from the painful bonds of ignorance, these concerns greatly outweighed all others in the early epoch. While they remained in the second one - the development of the Mahāyāna, certain concerns that were present in the original doctrines, but were left unexplored because they "tended not to edification", emerged and received more philosophical attention. Primary among these was "... the nature of true reality, and the realization in oneself of that true nature of things is held to be decisive for salvation."35

The epochs also differ with respect to what type of man each considers the ideal. The first had, and the Theravāda still has, the arhat as an ideal, a saint destined for no more rebirths. The second period regarded the Bodhisattva as an ideal. Suzuki gives a quote from the Saddharmapundarika
Sūtra which describes the Bodhisattva.

Other beings again desirous of omniscience, Buddhahood, . . . apply themselves to the commandment of the Tathāgatha and learn to understand the knowledge, powers, and conviction of the Tathāgatha, for the sake of the common weal and happiness, out of compassion to the world, for the benefit, weal, and happiness of the world at large, of both gods and men, for the sake of the complete Nirvāṇa of all beings.36

In the Deer Park at Isipatana in present day Benares, the Buddha presented his first discourse to his former fellow ascetics. The gist of it is that there is suffering (duḥkha) in the world, there is a cause of it, an end to it, and a way to that end.

Ordinarily duḥkha translates as suffering, sorrow, or misery, referring to the human lot in the world, with its burden of illness, old age, and death. These sufferings centre basically on the body. But the original teachings also include two other types of duḥkha. One is the mental suffering arising from desires for pleasant things and aversions to unpleasant ones. The Buddha mentions this type of suffering in his first discourse.

Union with the unpleasant is painful, painful is separation from the pleasant; and any craving unsatisfied, that, too, is painful.37

Because this type of sorrow, unlike physical suffering, arises from attitudes and dispositions towards things, it depends not so much on the body, as on a clinging to ideas
of what is and is not desirable. The Sanskrit term for the thirst which produces clinging is trṣṇa, or tanha in Pāli. Trṣṇa is an attachment of such intensity that it pervades, and is responsible for, the continuation of the round of birth-and-death. Almost ineradicable, it can be removed only after the most strenuous exertions.

The last major type of duḥkha is that of the conditioned world. With this meaning, duḥkha acquires deeper connotations than those of the two previously mentioned ones. When the Buddha states that birth, decay, and death are duḥkha, he is pointing to the transient, impermanent nature of the world. Things of the 'material' world come into being and pass away. Duḥkha in this context more accurately translates as change or impermanence rather than suffering or sorrow.

Not only the Buddhists saw the world in terms of suffering and transience. The view that this world is suffering was a common one in India at the time of the Buddha. If the Buddha was preoccupied with duḥkha, so were many of the Upaniṣadic sages. Also, Buddhism has the same explanation for man's suffering as do the Upaniṣads - he is ignorant. Because of his thirst for it, man clings to life. But this thirst results from a basic ignorance of the true nature of things. The twelve-fold chain of causation attempts to illustrate the relationship between trṣṇa and avidyā, and tries to show how the elements continue the series of man's round of births and deaths in the world. Traditionally, the chain of dependent origination is as
follows:

From ignorance arise the impressions (samskara)
From impressions arises consciousness (viññāna)
From consciousness comes embodied being (nāma-rūpa)
From embodied being arise the six senses (sadhāyatana)
From the senses arises contact (sparśa)
From contact arises feeling (vedāna)
From feeling comes thirst (trṣṇa)
From thirst comes clinging (upādāna)
From clinging arises existence (bhava)
From existence comes birth (jāti)
From birth comes old age, death, and all the ills of life.

In the Upaniṣads and the philosophy of the Advaita Vedānta, ignorance was construed at first as the cosmic power that clouded the innate perfection of Brahman, and, in the more philosophically developed speculations, as an error or misinterpretation and misapplication of characteristics. The Self was confused with the not-Self. But as Oldenberg points out, if one attempts to take a metaphysical approach with early Buddhism, the attempt would be one that the Buddhists themselves didn't try.

The ignorance is not to be anything in the way of a cosmic power, nor anything like a mysterious original sin, but it is within the range of earthly, tangible reality. The ignorance is the ignorance of the four sacred truths.38

The Pāli texts have the Buddha state that he wandered on the path from one birth to another because he did not see the four truths as they were (Mahā-vagga vi.29). Oldenberg also offers a quote from the "Sammaditthisuttanta" (Mājjhima-Nikāya) in which Sariputta states that ignorance is not knowing suffering, nor the cause, extinction, or the means to the
extinction of suffering. And the same theme is repeated in the "Visuddhi-magga", Chapter xvii, as given by H. C. Warren.

From the Majjhima-Nikāya passages, we can deduce that ignorance of the four truths doesn't necessarily refer solely to the verbal statements of the Buddha, as Oldenberg's statement tends to imply, but to the existential truths of suffering. The existential ignorance about suffering, its cause and end, pins man to the wheel of birth-and-death. Man doesn't know his own nature, mistakenly takes himself to be a soul or some other enduring entity, and consequently undergoes pains because of his delusions.

The twelve-fold chain of causation appears to one such that, if any one member of the chain were broken, then the entire complex would fall part. Theoretically that's the case, but practical efforts at liberation focus on the elimination of the first element, avidyā. The dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda) depicted by the twelve elements doesn't remain static. Ignorance is the motive force which perpetuates the other elements of the chain. Mahāyāna Buddhism expresses the notion metaphorically as seeds that reside in the Ālaya storehouse. Until these delusive residues are burnt out, birth and death continue.

The Pāli texts take up the matter by asking about the priority of ignorance. Why should it be placed at the head of the list? It isn't first in the sense that prakṛti is first, the causeless cause from which evolve the various
constituents of the human psyche and the natural world. Rather, it is primary only in discussions concerning the round of rebirths. It becomes a logically a priori necessity only for the practical purpose of explaining the round of births and deaths. It is a priori in the same sense that Kant believes the Categories must be a priori, in order that we can make sense of the world. In a temporal sense, avidyā is as beginningless for the Buddhists as it was for the Vedāntins.

As I have told you, O priests, the first beginning of ignorance cannot be discerned, nor can one say "Before a given point of time there was no ignorance, it came into being afterwards".\textsuperscript{41}

The chain of causation is also more graphically described as a wheel of existence. If ignorance appears at the head of the list, there follow the deprivities, such as the desire for existence. But in the cycle, sorrow, old age, etc., spring from these deprivities. "Thus it is when the deprivities have ripened that ignorance attains to fruition, as it is one of them."\textsuperscript{42} The texts state the idea explicitly: "This ignorance is not the beginning, this merely enunciates the chief of the elements of being."\textsuperscript{43}

In the Upaniṣads, when māyā deludes Brahman, the delusion is that of its true Self. The texts constantly stress the point that under all the apparent duality is a unity, and that is Brahman. But in early Buddhism, ignorance is ". . . without a personal cause or passive
recipient." This accords with one of the primary beliefs of Buddhism, that there is no enduring, distinct soul or personality in human existence. A human being results from the combination of the five skandhas, a Sanskrit word meaning, literally, the trunk of a tree, but used normally as meaning aggregate or group. They are all that can be discovered when the bodily and psychical states are subjected to examination. Body (rupa), feeling (vedana), perception (sankhara), synthetic mental formations (sankhara), and consciousness (vijnana) exhaust the human physical-psychical state, and no soul or self stands apart from them. Hence the doctrine of anatman.

In early Buddhism the doctrine has immense repercussions for the theory of re-birth due to continued avidya and its karmic effects. If there is no permanent soul, who is ignorant, and who continues to be re-born? For the Vedantins, the philosophical difficulty lay in deciding whether ignorance belonged to the jiva or Brahman. But at least there remains a substratum, though an inconceivable one, once duality is stripped from the world. Early Buddhism, however, refuses to discuss many of the metaphysical aspects of ignorance and re-birth. Hence, a detailed explanation of the nature of ignorance, and the relationship of that ignorance to the human being is made all that much more difficult. In his conversation with the monk Mulu¥kyaputta for example, the Buddha refuses to deny or affirm the identity or difference of soul and body. He also refuses to discuss the fate of
the enlightened man after death. The man who realizes the
truth of the Upaniṣads becomes one with Brahman. He is no
longer reborn in this world after death. But the Buddha
remains silent on the question of whether the arhat is, is
not, both is and is not, or neither is nor is not after death.

There are several reasons for the different attitudes.
The Upaniṣads, while dwelling on the problems of suffering,
are rooted in a metaphysical tradition. The Rg-Veda, for
example, asks questions about the Ultimate which continue,
though in a modified form, in the Upaniṣads.

Who gives us breath, who gives us strength,
whose bidding
All creatures must obey, the bright gods
even;
Whose shade is death, whose shadow life
immortal . . .
Who made the heavens bright, the earth
enduring,
Who fixed the firmament, the heaven of
heavens;
Who measured out the earth's extended
spaces? 45

Even at this early point the questions presuppose a maker or,
in a more abstract sense, a principle of origination. The
Upaniṣads continued that tendency by providing answers that
equated the Ultimate with, first, entities in the world of
things, then, as a non-perceptible Brahman.

Buddhism wasn't conditioned by the same historical
tradition as was the Vedānta. Certainly, it borrowed from
the already existing tradition in which it found itself. It
believes, as does Vedānta, that man must bear the responsibility
for his situation in life, that karma is only the actualization
in this life of past deeds. Buddhism also accepts the possibility of liberation from the wheel of samsāra, with its attendant pain. Though these similarities exist, the Upaniṣads sought to do away with ignorance with the discovery of an assumed, existing 'positive' truth, gradually evolved the notion of a series of births and deaths, and then sought a way out of the cycle. The answer to the problem of suffering was expressed in metaphysical terminology. Even though the search for a unifying explanation remained a religious activity, the emphasis was on an uncovering of an unknown rather than alleviation of pain. Buddhism began its tradition not in a mood of speculation, but in one of existential suffering. The impetus was, in comparison to the Upaniṣadic quest, a more negative one, the ridding of a felt pain instead of the discovery of an unknown.⁴⁶

So, Buddhism in its early phase refrains from an overly intellectual approach to avidyā, for it feels that metaphysics provides no significant gain in the existential sense. It has no direct, practical usefulness. This existential factor introduces both moral and social considerations into the criterion for truth: a solution that purports to alleviate suffering, but has no practical application, has the potential for, at best, perpetuating suffering and, at worst, intensifying it. If ignorance is pain, truth is the removal of that pain, both in oneself and others.

Furthermore, the Buddha refrained from metaphysical speculations because he believed that the 'truth' was beyond
man's understanding on the intellectual level. The *avyakṛta*, the questions that tend not to edification, have no answers on the linguistic level. If the assumptions about the nature of entities in the everyday world are false, there exists the strong possibility that any statement about them on the absolute level would be nonsensical. If the ego doesn't exist, in any real sense, to begin with, what could be said about it after the death of an individual?

In Advaita, *avidyā* was removed when one realized that the *atman* was Brahman. The self-identity that functions in terms of I and not-I changes to one that is a non-differentiated Self. But in early Buddhism, *avidyā* and *duḥkha* disappear only with *nirvāṇa*, and this is not a change of self-identity. The ego, or self, 'is' not. The belief in an I results from ignorance. Because there is no self in anything, a change to another type of self-identity is impossible. Hence, though the ego may be seen through, no real or true self comparable to Brahman exists in Buddhism. The Upaniṣads stated that Brahman existed (*tat sat*). *Nirvāṇa*, on the other hand, means cessation, though not the cessation of death. With *nirvāṇa*, death also ceases.

> Where is no-thing, where naught is grasped, this is the Isle of No-beyond. Nirvana do I call it - the utter extinction of aging and dying.47

In Advaita Vedānta, when one knows Brahman, he becomes Brahman. This doctrine, like that of the round of births and deaths, had evolved into its final form, the essences of
subject and object finally merging into one unitary being. The Buddhists claim that duhkha and avidyā cease simultaneously, but they avoid statements about the relationship between cessation and knowledge. There is certainly not the equating of knowledge with a state of being, for ontological statements about the fate of man do not apply in nirvāṇa. In this realm, "... there is no coming or going or remaining or deceasing or uprising for this (Nirvāṇa) is without support."48

But if nirvāṇa is not a state of being, or non-being, it is not a state of non-knowledge. The type of knowing present, though, isn't the empirical intellectual sort, being instead a radically different kind. It became known as prajñā in the Mahāyāna perfection of wisdom literature and transcendental truth (paramārthasatyam) in the Mādhyamika school. It is to this latter that we turn to see how the existential ignorance of early Buddhism was treated in a more philosophical context, and how the treatment compares with the Advaita approach.
SECTION V

The Nature of *Avidyā* and *Samvrtisatyam* in Nāgārjuna

The Mādhyamikas, like the Vedāntins, insist that this world is misconstrued because of *avidyā*. Under its sway, the common man, deluded by ignorance, misses the true nature of things and clings instead to a world that is fragmented and incomplete. For the Mādhyamikas, the basis for this error lies in believing that phenomena-entities are absolute. Nāgārjuna sets out to demonstrate the nature of *avidyā*, to show that ignorance is, among other things, adherence to conventions, and that supposedly limited entities aren't isolated from one another, but instead, are essentially related and conditioned by each other.

Because *avidyā* in Mādhyamika Buddhism has to do with the true nature of entities, including the human being, we begin with an examination of Nāgārjuna's views on the notions of their reality, their 'own-nature', or their claim to 'be'.

The term used to denote 'own-nature' or 'own-being' in both Nāgārjuna's and Candrakīrti's works is *svabhāva*. As the self-existent nature of things, "... it is that unique, own-most nature of anything."[^49] Whatever is subject to causes and conditions, and suffers creation, change, and decay, can't be called self-existent. Candrakīrti describes self-existent nature as "... invariableness, steadfastness
throughout all time."50 However, everything we experience in the world constantly undergoes change and depends on conditions.

The enlightened man can supposedly 'perceive' the other aspect of the world of things through non-sensory means. But ordinary people, deluded by primal ignorance, misinterpret sensory objects as real or self-existent. Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti both remain true to the spirit of the Buddha's discourses on questions regarding the sensory world. The Buddha, knowing that the absolute nature of the world was not intellectually comprehensible, refused to take a yes or no position on questions about the world's ultimate nature. Candrakīrti reinforces this position in the Prasannapada by stating that the own-nature of entities does not have an individual nature, that svabhāva was devoidness (śūnyatā).

Stecherbatsky was astute enough to realize that the doctrine of śūnyatā was not one of nihilism, an utter denial of everything. But he interprets śūnyatā as "relativity",51 though remaining aware of its more precise meaning - devoidness of independent reality. Relativity implies a relation between things, even if those things are transient. Mādhyamika, however, denies all thinghood in things, hence the emphasis on devoidness.

Śūnyatā cannot be encapsulated conceptually or through the senses. It follows that language doesn't have the ability to penetrate to this self-existent nature. Hence,
even the statement that svabhāva is steadfastness throughout all time can be misleading if it isn’t taken in a provisional sense. Candrakīrti doesn’t mean to assume an eternalist position, but he is trying to show the non-thing-like nature of svabhāva, one neither eternal nor changing. "When those genuinely striving for liberation have realized this, being free from the twin dogmas (of eternalism and naturalism), they rightly embrace the middle way."\(^{52}\) And that middle way is one that transcends both extremes, not resting in either one, or 'in between'.

But to say that svabhāva is śūnyata raises philosophical difficulties. Is the Mādhyamika position unreal then, as its opponents claim? And what of the four truths? Also, if nothing can 'be' in its own right, what of dukkha and nirvāṇa? Is enlightenment and the cessation of ignorance possible then?

The Mādhyamika notions of devoidness and unreality are not identical, though the assumption that they are is an understandable one if a person’s conception of reality is grounded in the sensory and intellectual realms. Śūnyatā is that which is not manifested in named things and is beyond thought construction.

This basic error as to the meaning of śūnyatā results from a confusion of the truth taught by the Buddha. And Nāgārjuna introduces the notion of two truths, or two realities, to correct this misunderstanding.

Nāgārjuna believes that the Buddha taught a mundane truth of the personal, everyday world (samvṛtisatya), and a
transcendent truth (paramārthasatya).

Candrakirti assigns four broad meanings of samvyrtisatya:

The everyday means total concealment. Again, ignorance arising from the utter concealment of the true nature of things is called the everyday. Again, to be reciprocally dependent in existence, that is, for things to be based on each other in utter reciprocity, is to be everyday. Again, the everyday means social convention, that is, the world of ordinary language and transactions between individuals. 53

Is samvyrtisatya then equivalent to avidyā in Vedānta?

Frederick J. Streng discusses the nature of samvyrtisatya54 and asks if it is either an illusion, thus equating it to māyā, or an indication towards the truth, a pointer towards it which would be discarded once the absolute truth was realized. The latter alternative has similarities to Śaṅkara's thoughts on the pramanas. Or is samvyrtisatya somehow a part of absolute truth? He concludes that conventional truth serves to point to a condition of freedom, the paramārthasatya. J. W. DeJong concludes that, for the Mādhyamikas, the everyday has no reality.

The Mādhyamikas, on the contrary, consider that the plurality of things and the categories of the Hinayāna have no reality. 55

By the categories DeJong means the groups of dharmas into which the Hinayāna split up the things of the world. The Hinayānists saw dharmas as entering into and leaving transient and ultimately, unreal combinations, all the while themselves remaining the ultimate, real entities. Samvyrtisatya, in
DeJong's opinion, would have no claim to truth whatever, being totally avidyā, since all its constituent parts are devoid of reality.

However, by saying that the everyday has no reality, DeJong commits the error which the dialectic of Nāgārjuna specifically hopes to prevent. He accepts a view (drṣṭi) of the world and gives it ontological status. The Mādhyamika dialectic and the four-cornered logic aim at showing that no statement can be made about the ultimate nature of the world. As T. R. V. Murti states:

The primordial error is the intellect being infected by the inveterate tendency to view Reality as identity or difference, permanent or momentary, one or many, etc. These views 'cover' or 'obscure' reality, and the dialectic administers a cathartic effect.56

That is, from the level of absolute truth, terms such as 'reality' and 'unreality' do not apply.

While the Vedānta believed that intellectual knowledge (jñāna) did play a role in the realization of Brahman, the Mādhyamikas state that intellectual activity only covers the truth. What for the Vedāntin is a way leading from ignorance, is for the Mādhyamika Buddhist ignorance itself. Hence, saṁvṛtisatyam as ignorance is not viewed in the same way as avidyā was by the Vedāntins. Saṁvṛtisatyam is pre-eminently a conglomerate of mistaken views, opinions, and beliefs about the world which cover its reality and distort its true nature. As ignorance, it is depicted in a 'negative' way, as that which lacks correctness. In Vedānta, however, avidyā is
shown as a positive 'entity', a bhāva padārtha. Through avidyā, or māyā, Brahman disposes itself as Īśvara and the jīvas. The long and involved discussion of the relationship of avidyā to Brahman, and the questions as to the 'location' of avidyā, point out the belief held by many Vedāntins that ignorance was susceptible to analysis as an entity as well as an investigation of it in terms of delusive notions.

In Nāgārjuna's philosophy, ignorance consists of an interpretation or a way of taking the world in line with faulty views, believing the transient and relative to be absolute, and taking portions of existence to be complete in themselves. Nāgārjuna repeatedly points out that the entities of the world have no existence in themselves. Ignorance rests in taking them to be self-existent, and it perpetuates itself and increases because of the wrong imaginings and thought constructions springing from the initial misconception.

(Common people) do not know and have not seen the non-substantiality of things and so they give rise to imaginative constructions in regard to all things and cling to them. On account of their clinging in regard to things that are not substantial, they yet give rise to (perverted) cognitions, (perverted) understandings, and (perverted) views . . . 57

The link between the initial misconception and its continuation is tresna. But ignorance is in Madhyamika, as it was in early Buddhisms, the primary factor. Though suffering is also related to ignorance here, Nāgārjuna's
emphasis rests on the cognitive functions. But, as in the Pāli texts, ignorance doesn't arise at a specific moment in time. And in this respect, the Mādhyamikas agree with the Vedantins.

Because the wiseman, or yogī, knows that the everyday arises from ignorance, and because he has seen through to the ultimate devoidness of the everyday, he does not ascribe ultimate existence to things of the world. He does not "... impute ultimate reality to everyday things thinking them self-existent."58 Neither does he cling to the notion of devoidness, for he also realizes that the world of the everyday has a validity of its own, though not an ultimate one.

But ignorance remains only one interpretation of saṃvrtisatyam. Several others point out the distinctive features of the Mādhyamika philosophy when compared, not only to Vedānta, but also to the earlier Buddhist schools.

The Hinayānists had held that nirvāṇa could be attained, and that it was something to be acquired. Within the scheme of dharmas, it was an unconditioned dharma. With this description of nirvāṇa, it was comparatively simple to distinguish between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, between the conditioned and the unconditioned, and between the transient and the eternal. With Nāgārjuna's attack on the concept of dharma, changes occurred. If the dharmas were devoid of independent existence, and were basically śūnyatā, then they lost their status as the criterion by means of which the realm
of ignorance was distinguished from nirvāṇa. This, together with a dialectic that frustrated the taking of any extreme view, necessitated a radically new interpretation of the world.

This interpretation presented itself in the doctrine that the everyday was also 'true' in the sense that it was also, in some, 'real'. Yet, there arises the difficulty of ascribing reality to something that has already been described as lacking self-existence, as being distorted by views, and in a state of constant change. The claim of Advaita Vedānta that the Real is homogeneous, unlimited, and essentially unchanging, seems to be more intellectually sound. However, saṁvṛtisatyam can be investigated fruitfully as that mode of the real nature of things which is characterized by change and plurality. This aspect of entities falls within the definition of saṁvṛtisatyam as pratītyasamutpāda.

Candrakīrti states that "... to be reciprocally dependent in existence, that is, for things to be dependent on each other in utter reciprocity, is to be everyday." Because, even in this mode, entities are devoid of self-existence, they 'are' only as the result of a vast complex of causes. And since dharmas are sūrya, the process of dependent co-arising doesn't unfold itself in a linear temporal manner, one momentary dharma conditioning another. Instead, each so-called 'entity' is influenced by and simultaneously influences all other entities in the everyday world. Because categories such as space, time, and motion
also belong to the *samvrti* realm, notions of cause and effect, action, doer, and causality all belong to *samvrtisatyam*.

As Nāgārjuna states:

> Defilements, karmans, bodily entities, doers and effects are all similar to the nature of an imaginary city in the sky, a mirage and a dream.60

The Mādhyamikas don't believe that the world of interdependence is 'false'. It has its own reality, just as a dream has. But it isn't *paramārthasatyam*, or the transcendent way of taking the world. Instead, it is

> ... the world of everyday language and transactions between individuals which is characterized by the distinction between knowing and the thing known, naming and the thing named, and so on.61

This everyday, conventional reality, arising as it does from language, was also the world constructed by speech in Śaṅkara's system. Its existence had generated discussions as to the nature of public, or primal, ignorance. The followers of the Bhāmati school had stressed private ignorance and separate worlds of experience. The Vivaraṇa school contended that, if ignorance was private, problems of shared experience arose. What would be 'real' for different people? Is a 'truth' that is accepted by a number of people merely a shared delusion?

The Mādhyamika tackles the problem with the notion of *samvrtisatyam* as social convention.

The Kārikās and Candrakīrti's commentary stress that *nirvāṇa* is the cessation of all named things. But the
conventional world consists of a construct of word-entities, names (nāma), and characteristics. The name, in turn, is a limiting designation which artificially bounds a beginningless and endless process within a restricted spatial and temporal matrix. When certain forms, colours, tastes, etc., converge, an 'object' comes into existence; when they separate, 'it' ceases to exist. The only 'thing' that arises or passes away is a configuration that has no existence in itself, that is ultimately sunya, devoid of substance. The extent to which individuals accept or reject conventions that society believes to be 'true' determines the degree to which the public illusion becomes a public truth. The mentally ill, artists, and geniuses are able to see the everyday world in ways which elude the majority of the population. The enlightened person sees both sides of the convention, penetrates to its essential emptiness, and accepts its validity within a social context. Public ignorance results from a disposition or an ability of the mind to function with words, symbols, and signs. The ability to communicate and accept these as real in themselves, forgetting the contingent nature of the constructs, produces a common world in which the individual finds himself, and within which he seeks the answers to worldly problems through scientific, metaphysical, and religious activities.

The disposition of things in terms of social conventions nevertheless remains a necessary step on the way to the realization of paramarthasatyam. Here perhaps lies one of the
reasons for the acceptance of samvrti as satyam, as a 'truth or 'reality'. If the world were only an illusion in the sense of a deception, it would be rejected outright. But Candrakīrti writes that

... unless the personalized world of verbalized transactions is accepted as a base ..., it is impossible to point, or monst rate, the ultimate or transcendent reality.62

If nirvāna is the cessation of all named things, it can be 'known' as such only after one has known named things. This bestows a special status on human life, for, as far as we know, it is the only one capable of naming. Within contemporary philosophy, Heidegger also sees human existence as unique because of its 'relationship' to language. He believes that it is only through language that entities come to be, that through language they are pulled out, so to speak, from the background of being. And because of this naming, Dasein is the only entity which has a world, while other entities only have an environment. We can note in passing that Candrakīrti states that "... the ordinary person is called a 'world' in so far as he is understood to be based on the five elements of personal existence."63 But while Heidegger believes that language and poetry provide a clearing in being, Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti see samvrti as a level to be transcended.

The way to a realization of paramārthasatyam lies in the cessation of viewing named things as having independent selves. And the practical way to that end is to see that
there is no self to one's own existence. Nāgārjuna, following the original teachings in this respect, denies the existence of any such entity as ātman.

The Buddhas have provisionally employed the term ātman and instructed on the true idea of anātman. They have also taught that any such (abstract) entity as ātman or anātman does not exist.64

The doctrine of the existence of ātman has been taught by the Buddhas to turn people away from a materialist view of self, as was the case with the Cārvāka system. The teaching induces morally responsible actions. On a deeper level, the doctrine taught that there was a reality beyond the ego, one inaccessible through words or concepts. Therefore, both ātman and anātman are denied by the Buddhas.

The process by which one's real identity is mistaken for something else is described by the Prajñāparamitā-sūtra in terms of a moon whose image is reflected on water.

It is under ignorance that one misses the moon and sees only the image, and mistakes the image itself for the moon. It is then that the sense of 'I' comes to be applied exclusively to the object with which the self, viz., the self-conscious intellect has identified itself.65

Once the self-conscious intellect imagines itself to be "I", and to be in an absolute sense, dichotomies such as "I" and "not-I" arise. And the dichotomizing process becomes applied to things in the world. But all distinctions are relative. The entities in the world arise because of mutual inter-
dependence, they do not have the absolute self-existence qua entities that the limiting intellect would ascribe to them.

Conceived through ignorance, self is a particular. Taken within the context of a world of particulars whose existence is unquestioned, self in this sense has some reality or truth, just as entities are said to have own-being or svabhāva. It is the contextual self of things that is true on the samvṛtisatyam level.

However, the enlightened man realizes that the true nature of both himself and other entities is not a particular. He uses the term "I" but he doesn't cling to the idea that a separate I-substance exists. He recognizes the conventions of the world and the limitations of language and acts accordingly.

Equally as important, a man who has rid himself of delusions does not cling to the opposite of I, the notion of not-I. With enlightenment, the clinging to a false I ceases. But there are two ways of denying the I concept. The proper one denies the notion of an I substance or ātman, but accepts it as a convenient name for a complex of skandhas that are themselves essentially śūnya. The improper denial of ātman denies both the ego-substance and its conventionality.

The texts state that the Buddhist writings have two ways of teaching that there is no I. One denies and clings to the idea of no I, the other denies but doesn't cling to it.

The first kind of no 'I' is an extreme (a case of exclusiveness),
while the second one is the Middle doctrine (the non-exclusive way). 

In Vedānta, the denial of I was equivalent to knowledge of Brahman. Though Brahman is essentially beyond words, Śāṅkara described it as Bliss, Consciousness, and Being. Because the Buddhists denied the existence of any self in entities, the task of pointing to a truth beyond avidyā was much more difficult for them for, in a very real sense, there is no 'thing' to point to. Nevertheless, the perfection of wisdom sūtras spoke of prajñāpāramitā, of "wisdom gone beyond", or, a wisdom that transcended duality. From the accounts given in the texts, prajñāpāramitā is equivalent to paramārthasatya, though from different points of view. And if these are approached from still a third point, both are nirvāṇa.

The authors of the sūtras rigourously avoid assigning predicates to prajñāpāramitā which would lead to its being interpreted in empirical terms. The most effective way of doing this involves description by negation, an approach also used to good advantage by Dionysus the Areopagite and St. Thomas Aquinas. The perfection of wisdom, being absolute cessation, remains without any distinguishing marks. It has no basis or foundation, for, not being an entity, it enters into no relations. It is described as neither bound nor free, neither existing nor non-existing, neither arising nor passing away. The sūtras attempt to transcend the realm of dichotomies yet still avoid total nihilism. Here again
language produces limitations. Another kind of 'knowing', praṇā, which transcends the differentiated, and differentiating, operational modes of the intellect and the senses, can be attained. But it is not any 'thing' to be attained and no one does the attaining. A description of how the Bodhisattva courses, or trains, in this wisdom illustrates the point.

Here the Bodhisattva, the great being, coursing in the perfection of wisdom, . . . , does not review a Bodhisattva, nor the word "Bodhisattva", nor the course of a Bodhisattva, (nor the perfection of wisdom, nor the word "perfection of wisdom". He does not review that "he courses", nor that "he does not course"). And why? Because the Bodhisattva, . . . is actually empty of the own-being of a Bodhisattva, and because perfect wisdom is by its own-being empty.67

His training can't be called a training in the conventional sense, but neither is there a non-training in the nihilistic sense. In this respect, T. R. V. Murti's comments to the effect that there is no knowledge of an underlying reality in Mādhyamika have to be considered carefully.68 The reality done away with by the Mādhyamikās is the one accessible through language and, hence, a limited and incomplete one. It doesn't refer to the knowledge of the own-being of things designated śūnyata which may have a modality so inaccessible to language that the only appropriate statement about it is that it is devoid of all characteristics.

Talk of the cessation of ignorance from an 'ontological' point of view is talk of nirvāṇa. Strictly speaking, one
doesn't attain nirvāṇa, for within nirvāṇa no distinction exists between the seeker and what he seeks. Nirvāṇa is not in the nature of a named thing.

Nirvāṇa is said to be what neither wastes away nor is realized through action, what neither terminates nor is everlasting, what neither ceases to be nor comes to be.69

The Prasannapadā talks about nirvāṇa indirectly, in terms of named things. In that context, nirvāṇa is the cessation of all named things and the coming to a halt of all reifying thought. The knowledge of nirvāṇa is stressed as the bringing to a halt that aspect of the mind which constructs absolute, self-existent entities from things that are mutually conditioned, entities whose essential nature is śūnyatā. Consequently, it means the cessation of ego-consciousness and the tendency to see the world as self-centered. And yet, because we remain caught up in the net of language, even the above statement cannot be true. Ignorance takes the ego to be real. With knowledge comes the realization that the idea of self was a false one. So nirvāṇa isn't the disappearance of a self or an ego, for there never was anything real to dispose of.

Because of this illusory nature of ego and all other entities, there is no ultimate difference between them and nirvāṇa. The worlds of change and of nirvāṇa are identical.

The nature of Nirvāṇa is the nature of samsāra; there is not the slightest difference to be ascertained between the two.70
This way of taking nirvāṇa, one that sees no predicable difference between the two 'realms' holds for the Mādhyamikas, not for the early Buddhists. For the latter, nirvāṇa was eternal, something to be acquired and opposite to samsāra. In all likelihood, the Buddha himself would not have categorized nirvāṇa in such a way. The Mādhyamikas certainly do not. For them, no statements apply to nirvāṇa, for they are all saṁvṛtic in nature.
SECTION VI

Conclusion: The Nature of Ignorance in Advaita Vedānta and Mādhyamika Buddhism

Western philosophers have acted, and continue to act, on the belief that intellectual activity can dispell ignorance and provide insights into the nature of the world and man's place in it. Though it is accepted that Sanskrit has no exact equivalent for the word "philosophy", the intent behind the intellectual activities of both Eastern and Western tradition is the same. There exists a desire for linguistic expression of insights into the real or ultimate nature of the world in a manner that doesn't abuse logic and the intellect. If the search for a liberating truth is the prime goal in Advaita Vedānta and Mādhyamika Buddhism, thought about avidyā is of secondary importance. To ask about the nature of ignorance is, from an existential point of view, beside the main point unless one believes that this intellectual activity can help alleviate the existential dilemma. Here lies one of the basic differences between Advaita and Mādhyamika in their attempts to dispell ignorance.

Advaita attempts to make the concept of non-dualism, the Brahman beyond avidyā, intelligible. It tries to present arguments for the existence of Brahman which do not conflict with the nature of Brahman, for one of its
characteristics is Intelligence, or intelligent Self. The Self, in some way, cannot be incompatible with the workings of the intellect. In a curious way, perhaps in the analogically predicative way of St. Thomas, the Advaitins admit that language has limitations, but that it is also practically necessary. This justifies predication of Brahman.

From bliss these beings are born; 
by bliss, when born, they live; 
into bliss they enter at their death.71

And this also allows for the belief that a full and complete intellectual grasp of the nature of Brahman, and of the way in which Brahman has been deluded by his own māyā, can lead one to a point where a direct intuition can complete the transformation from ignorance to knowledge. Śāṅkara had taught that jñāna, knowledge, was the path to mokṣa. This knowledge, however, is not the same as the Buddhist prajñā. Suzuki describes the essential difference in An Outline of Mahayana Buddhism:

... jñā or jñāna (means) intellect.
... Prajñā in many cases may safely be rendered by faith, not a belief in revealed truths, but a sort of immediate knowledge gained by intuitive intelligence.72

The faith in the ability of the intellect to clear the ground for an intuitive insight into Brahman's nature explains the predilection for the scholastic disputes that arose after Śāṅkara's death. A correct theoretical foundation was required for the realization of Brahman. In this respect,
Advaita retains the concerns of some of the earlier Upaniṣads for correct dogma (Yājñavalkya’s interrogation by the brahmins is an example of this), and again demonstrates its continuity with them. It also shows the purely philosophical side of the Indian search for truth. While Advaita has often been classified as a mystical idealism because Brahman can only be realized in a non-intellectual way, the literature dealing with Brahman attempts to talk about it in a logical and sensible way. So while the Upaniṣadic sages had no qualms about contradictory statements regarding Brahman’s nature, Advaita admits them but vacillates in its point of view. Brahman moves and remains still simultaneously, but from two different points of view, the mundane and the absolute. Brahman is qualified and non-qualified. It can be separated into jīva and Isvāra, yet still remains one. Logically, the statements are nonsensical. But if one accepts that another point of view exists, then the possibility of an intuitive reconciliation of these apparently contradictory predicates also exists. So the Advaitins also aver that absolute knowledge, if it is to overcome ignorance, must take root in the faith that such knowledge is possible. Hence the, to Western people, almost inexplicable weight which Indian philosophers place on the authoritativeness of the Scriptures.

The Mādhyamika position vis-à-vis the relationship of intellectual activity to paramārthasatyam can be illustrated
with Nāgārjuna's own words:

If I had a thesis of my own to advance, you could find fault with it. Since I have no thesis to advance, the question of disproving it does not arise.\(^73\)

The statement has several levels of meaning. If Nāgārjuna had realized the truth himself, no distinction existed between himself and a thesis, so no one was advancing a thesis apart from himself. Secondly, the main purpose of Nāgārjuna's writings was to show that all things were \(sūnya\). If that applied to theses as well, then, of course, no thesis existed in itself. But by far the most important meaning rests in what the statement says about the relationship of language and \(prajñā\), or transcendent truth. No thesis can be advanced that adequately explains \(paramārthasatyam\) or \(nirvāṇa\). All statements, by their nature, belong to \(saṁvṛtisatyam\), and while they can point to \(paramārthasatyam\), or be about transcendent truth, all predicates fall short of it.

Critics of the Mādhyamika have attacked it because it apparently seeks to repudiate philosophical statements about the 'Real' without putting forward any position of its own. While the Mādhyamikas may not admit to holding a position, they do have things to say.

For them, all entities are mutually conditioned and totally dependent on each other immediately and simultaneously. Because they are mutually conditioned, they lack a substantial, self-existent nature, a \(svabhāva\) equivalent to \(ātman\). So nothing ultimate can be said about them for this reason also.
Nāgārjuna points out the weaknesses of other philosophies to show the contradictions in which any and all statements find themselves when they are pushed to their logical extremes. The Mādhyamika uses intellect not to construct predicative statements about a metaphysical reality, as does the Vedānta, but to bring more fully to consciousness the conflicting positions that the intellect produces. Moreover, the use of intellect in this dialectical way aims at showing that reason isn't able to attain 'truth', that it produces instead the everyday world of things. Since intellect (jñāna) cannot reveal the śunya aspect of things, the Mādhyamikas believe that the ultimate way of taking things must be intuitive, not cognitive.

While the approaches to the removal of ignorance differ, the ways of viewing samvrtisatyam and vyāvahāraḥ in Buddhism and Vedānta have similarities. Both concede another way of looking at the world, one that annuls plurality. Both also admit that the everyday has some 'reality'. In order to prevent logical confusion, the Advaitins ground their predicative statements in the world, not in Brahman. Samvrti, too, is the transactional realm of words and conventions. Only a sage, however, can see beyond its contextual truth. Both Advaita and Mādhyamika also advocate a cessation of habitual ways of taking the world. For Advaita, the pramāṇas lead up to and exhaust themselves before the intuition of Brahman. In Mādhyamika, nirvāna is the cessation of reifying thought, and the end of named things.
Here lies one of the contentious points in a comparative study of the two schools. While Advaita believes that intuitive experience transcends the intellect and the senses, it remains an experience, though a radically different one. For the Mādhyamikas, if nirvāṇa is the cessation of all named things, it would seem that experience, the consciousness of sensory, intellectual, volition, and emotional occurrences, also ceases. Nāgārjuna writes:

If there is neither karman nor doer, where could the effect arising from the karman be? Where there is no effect, how could there be any percipient (i.e., experiencer)?

Yet a Bodhisattva continues to work to save sentient beings, and a wise man does not deny the saṁvṛti aspect of reality. They have a consciousness of this world, but one which somehow transcends cause and effect. Their modes of existence, then, must be such that "experience" and "non-experience" do not apply to them.

Theoretically at least then, Brahman and nirvāṇa differ. The literature reinforces this conclusion with descriptions of the separation between the common world and the absolute one. In the Advaita tradition, the literature depicts an immediate, clean, and complete break between the states of ignorance and knowledge. Maṇḍana Miśra, representative of the brahmanic tradition, wrote: "Knowledge is the opposite of the erroneous cognition. When it arises, there is certainly the destruction of the erroneous cognition." And Śrī Suresvara, who disagreed with him on other points,
agrees.

The eternal knower is to be realized as the Self and as solitary and free from all objects. What is now known objectively as 'I' will then be but a discarded limb.\textsuperscript{76}

Śāṅkara himself writes:

But when (the jīva), discarding the aggregate of body, sense organs and mind, it arrives . . . at the knowledge that it is not itself that aggregate, . . . it lifts itself above the vain conceit of being one with the body, and itself becomes the Self, whose nature is unchanging, eternal Cognition.\textsuperscript{77}

The Mādhyamika writings also make a 'separation' between their samvrtisatyaḥ and paramārtha-satyaḥ. But no predicates apply to the transcendent realm. The Heart Sutra has a very distilled and precise expression of Mādhyamika notion of transcendent truth.

There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, . . . there is no decay or death, no extinction of decay and death . . . There is no cognition, no attainment and no non-attainment.\textsuperscript{78}

The earlier Buddhist texts had made a distinction between suffering and the deathless state of nirvāṇa. But not here. The Mādhyamikas have developed a greater dialectical skill in expressing the 'experience', or 'no-experience', of nirvāṇa. Advaita states that Brahman is one, but in leading to the intuitive fact behind the theory, it uses dichotomies and predicative statements. Mādhyamika denies predicative statements about the ultimate own-being of entities outright,
supporting the attempt with doctrines such as that of śūnyatā. In short, we find two distinctive methods in use here. And the methods differ because the notions of ignorance in the two systems differ.

Ignorance, as adhyāsa, in Vedānta does have similarities to saṁvṛti in that both are, in a sense, mistakes. When one superimposes characteristics of objects on the Self, he performs an operational error. A definition of the saṁvṛti world is the mis-taking of objects to be existent independent of causes and conditions. The differences in the two of mis-taking, however, become evident right away. Brahman exists. One merely ascribes characteristics to it which do not belong to it. The mis-taking of saṁvṛtisatyam concerns the very notion of self rather than its characteristics. The everyday is everyday by virtue of the belief that things and persons have a self. Paramārthasatyam is the truth or reality resulting from the cessation of this belief, not from the realization of Self.

Again, ignorance as māyā appears to have similarities to saṁvṛti when it is defined as ignorance. But māyā has several meanings. It can be interpreted as illusion, not in the sense that things are completely unreal, but in the sense that their Brahman-nature is unperceived. Māyā can also refer to that which is responsible for the existential fact. Only with the consciousness of a world can there be consciousness of being in the world and, in Heidegger's words, a striving for authentic being. So māyā also means the world
as it is taken to be real, i.e., to exist independently of
mind in a material, spatial, and temporal context. But māyā
is also the metaphysical principle with which the Advaita
explains the presence of a pluralistic world which, in
essence, is non-dualistic. The concept of māyā explains the
existence of a Brahman that exists, is infinite and uniform,
but which appears not to be. Since all the Advaita philos-
ophers admit that Brahman is the Self of entities, they
admit a māyā that obscures the Self. From the Upaniṣads to
Śaṅkara, a need for explaining why Brahman is not self-
evident has existed. And the disputes have raged over the
tonature of māyā, and over its relationship to Brahmar.

We have already seen how the philosophical attempts of
Advaita and early Buddhism were described as 'positive' and
'negative'. But both traditions assume their orientations
with respect to a metaphysical absolute towards which they
strive. Though the Buddha himself refused to take a position
on metaphysical questions, nirvāṇa for the Hinayāna and
Brahman for Advaita Vedānta are both attainable, eternal,
and characterized as blissful. This may be a factor in the
belief of some modern writers, such as Radhakrishnan and
Oldenberg, that Buddhism does not differ radically from its
Upaniṣadic counterpart.

Though adhyāsa and māyā have similarities to samvṛti,
the 'relation' of samvṛti to paramārtha differs from the
relation of the preceding two terms to Brahman. Samvṛtisatyam
has been defined as ignorance and as the conventional world
of social transactions. As the everyday world it resembles māyā when māyā is interpreted as the world taken to be real. But saṁvr̥tisatyam doesn't obscure or cover paramārthasatyam as māyā obscures Brahman. The everyday world is never discussed in material terms, as the conjunction of māyā and Brahman was considered to be the material cause of the world. And saṁvr̥tisatyam is not dependent on paramārthasatyam as māyā is dependent on Brahman. The entities of the world in Mādhyamika philosophy are reciprocally dependent on each other for existence, not on an invisible Self, as is the case in Advaita Vedānta. Whereas māyā can be considered as a quasi-entity which distorts the Self, saṁvr̥tisatyam is one way of taking the world, or perhaps one way of 'worlding', and paramārthasatyam another. But, since, in an ultimate sense, there is no one taking and nothing being taken, the everyday is a way and paramārthasatyam is, in Taoist terminology, the Way. If "being" weren't such a difficult term to deal with, connoting non-being, existence and non-existence, etc., we could say that saṁvr̥tisatyam was one mode of being and paramārthasatyam another, the "authentic" one, though here again difficulties arise. Perhaps the most precise way of speaking of the difference is to say that saṁvr̥tisatyam and paramārthasatyam are both modes of reality.

This being so, then there is no difference between them from the ultimate viewpoint. Advaita also states that the world is merely Brahman with attributes, Sagunā Brahman, and that, in essence, it is never affected by the attributes.
But unlike Advaita, Mādhyamika doesn’t attempt to provide reasons for the disposition of the world as saṁvṛti. It states simply that the everyday arises from, or more precisely is, ignorance. Furthermore, because predicative statements by nature do not apply to paramārthasatyam, Mādhyamika refrains from categorizing it, saying simply that it is śūnya, and this only as a prajñāpti, an expedient expression. Since the saṁvṛtī world is also śūnya, no attempt is made to bridge the two realms. Saṁvṛtisatyam doesn’t exist in its own right, and paramārthasatyam is beyond predication, so all that remains is the destruction of our erroneous views and mistaken ways of acting. As a Zen master might say, there is nothing to teach. The Buddha’s silence on metaphysical questions now appears as an expression of the realization that all such questions, and any possible answers, are grounded in a world empty of enduring reality.

But the only way to realize this is to first accept saṁvṛti for the reality that it appears to be. The everyday must be accepted as real before the transcendent truth becomes known. The Buddha teaches an everyday truth so that, once accepted, the momentum of the inherent conflicts in our beliefs about it, spurred on by a dialectical criticism and doctrines such as that of śūnyata, will lead to an intuitive realization of paramārthasatyam.

This attitude certainly differs from the one now prevalent in most contemporary cultures, Eastern as well as Western, one that believes in the necessity for a correct
theory which will show the proper way to act or to be.
The importance of a notion such as that of paramārthasatyaṃ seems to be in its statement that we already 'are' in a vastly different way than that which our intellect and our senses lead us to believe.

If the West wishes to understand not only the profundities of Eastern thought, but perhaps also the mysteries encountered in its own sciences, it might look to the intuitive approach found in the religious and philosophical texts of philosophies such as Advaita and Mādhyamika. Other cultures have practised other modes of enquiry into problems of human concern, and both the endurance of the traditions and the example of those said to be successful in their quest testify to the presence of something worthy of greater attention. If the West does start to believe that the walls of ignorance can be breached by other than currently accepted means, we may soon be reading passages such as the following ones, but from Western sources.

What we see is illusory, without substance, like the antics of puppets in a film. Are you afraid to die? You need not be. For whether you are killed or die naturally, death has no more substantiality than the movement of these puppets. Or, to put it another way, it is no more real than the cutting of air with a knife, or the bursting of bubbles, which reappear no matter how often they are broken.81

The world as apprehended by the senses is the least true (in the sense of complete), the least
dynamic (in the sense of the eternal movement), and the least important in a vast 'geometry of existence' of unspeakable profundity, whose rate of vibration, whose intensity and subtlety are beyond verbal description. 82

Unfathomable are the countless worlds In the totality of universes. Many are new or are decaying While many others soon will cease to be Like leaves in a forest Some flourish others fall . . . Some worlds of pure light [are made] Suspended steadily in space . . . Some are shaped like flowers . . . Some are vast as the ocean, Spinning like a turning wheel. 83
FOOTNOTES

1 All translations are taken from R. E. Hume, The Thirteen Principal Upanishads (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921).

2 Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (2.5.14).

3 Hume, Principal Upanishads, p. 41.

4 References and translations are taken from R. D. Karmarkar, Gauḍapāda-Kārikā (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, 1953).

5 Two supporters of this theory are V. Bhattacharyya, The Āgamaśāstra of Gauḍapāda (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1943), and S. Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922).

6 Karmarkar, Gauḍapāda-Kārikā, p.xxv.


9 Śaṅkara, Preamble to The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Saṅkarācārya, trans. George Thibaut, "The Sacred Books of the East", Vol. 34, ed. Max Müller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890). Further references to the same work are indicated by B.S.B. (Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya).

10 Ibid.

11 Italics mine.

12 B.S.B., II.i.14.

14 Quoted by Devaraja, p. 67.

15 B.S.B., II.i.6.

16 Devaraja, p. 70.

17 B.S.B., I.iv.23.


24 Ingalls, op.cit., p. 72.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. 230.

28 Ibid., p. 256.

29 Ibid., p. 261.

31. Ibid., p. 74.


33. Padmapāda, Pañcapādikā, p. 12.


39. Quoted by Oldenberg, p. 240.


41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., p. 174.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., p. 175.


46. For a fuller account of the similarities and differences between Buddhism and the Upanisads see Bahadur Mal, The
Religion of Buddha and Its Relation to Upaniṣadic Thought (Hashiapur: Vishveshivaranand Vedic Research Institute, 1958).


48 Ibid., p. 94.

49 Candrakīrti, Prasannapadā, trans. G. M. C. Sprung, draft copy, Chap. XV, 263.

50 Ibid., XV, 265.


52 Prasannapadā, XV, 276.11.

53 Ibid., XXIV, 492. For a more detailed list of the ways in which saṃvṛti can be rendered, see Mervyn Sprung, "The Madhyamika Doctrine of Two Realities as a Metaphysic", The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedānta (Dordrecht-Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1973), p. 43.

54 F. J. Streng, "The Buddhist Doctrine of Two Truths as a Religious Philosophy", Journal of Indian Philosophy, V. I, No. 3, pp. 262-263.


58 Prasannapada, XXIV, 492.
59 Ibid.


61 Prasannapaḍā, XXIV, 492.

62 Ibid., XXIV, 494.

63 Ibid., XXIV, 492.

64 Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, XV, 6.

65 Ramanan, op. cit., p. 59.

66 Ibid., p. 105.


69 Prasannapaḍā, XXV, 521.

70 Ibid., XXV, 522. Nāgārjuna's own expression for the lack of any basic difference between saṁsāra and nirvāṇa is found in XXV, 19 of his Kārikās: "There is no basic difference whatever between nirvāṇa and saṁsāra; there is no basic difference whatever between saṁsāra and nirvāṇa.

71 B.S.B., III, vi.

72 D. T. Suzuki, op. cit., pp. 82-83.

74. Mūlamadhyamakārikā, XVII, 30.

75. E. Deutsch, Source Book, p. 236.

76. Naïskarmya Siddhi, IV, 29.

77. B.S.B., I.iii.19.


79. Mūlamadhyamakārikā, XXV, 19.

80. Ibid., XXIV, 18.


82. Ibid., p. 75.

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