

Hinduism - Brahman/Atman

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

You might be asking is Brahman the name of God in Hinduism? And what about Atman? If you're a little bit familiar with Eastern religions, you might know that many of them have different conceptions of God.

These conceptions inform the technical categorization of these religions, which really occurred in the 17th century, primarily in Europe.

This lesson will answer these questions, as well as look at Hinduism and some of its conceptions of the divine and transcendent world. It will also cover some of the variations within Hinduism, the monotheistic tendencies, and some of the polytheistic tendencies. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Theism, Dualism, and Monism

1a. Theism

1b. Dualism

1c. Monism

2. Advaita Vedanta

3. Dvaita Vedanta Compared with Advaita

1. Theism, Dualism, and Monism

1a. Theism

One important concept when approaching the Eastern religions is theism. It concerns a belief that there is a supreme creator god responsible for the unfolding realms of existence, form, causality, creation, destruction, et cetera. Theistic religions generally worship the divine creator being, very often called God.

Religions that don't recognize a single creator god in this way are categorized as non-theistic. Zen Buddhism is a clear example of a non-theistic religion and spiritual orientation. Hinduism on the other hand, partly because it is so diverse and has such a rich and far-reaching history, has elements of both theism and non-theism.

1b. Dualism

A big part of this is the notions of dualism and non-dualism. Notions of God vary within different Hindu traditions. Most of them recognize and refer to the same sacred texts, the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita, but they are approached in a variety of different ways and include references to many gods.

At the same time, the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita also contain elements of theism, such as the personal god Krishna, for example, with whom the characters engage. Because of this, Hinduism is often thought of in monotheistic terms.

1c. Monism

The Western term Monism has often been applied to these particular sects of Hinduism. Monism refers to the unity of substance and essence; it is the idea that many different things or substances can be explained according to one principal substance or reality. This is usually understood as a higher order of being.

The Vedanta refers to the philosophy contained in the Upanishads, one of the central ancient sacred texts in Hinduism. The term Vedanta itself means the end goal or purpose of the Upanishads. For a Hindu, final liberation from the cycle of suffering in reincarnation is often considered to be the principal aim. Historically, there have been different spiritual perspectives on this, as well as which philosophical tools to refer to and use for guidance and support.

2. Advaita Vedanta

During the eighth century of the Common Era, a man known as Shankara Bhagavadpada, or Adi Shankara, organized the entire philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. This philosophy brought the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sutras into a unified doctrine. This was based largely on the principle of non-duality between **Brahman** and **Atman**.

Brahman is the supreme pure consciousness and ultimate essence that is within and beyond the world. Brahman permeates all existence. It is the source and the end of all being. Atman is the Sanskrit word for "self." It refers to one's true self, beyond appearances and attachments, and pure consciousness. Proper self-knowledge leads to the realization of the essential unity of self, Atman, with the transcendent, Brahman.



TERMS TO KNOW

Brahman

In Hinduism, the unitary spirit that binds together the universe.

Atman

The primitive or fundamental experience of phenomena; the Sanskrit word for "self."

3. Dvaita Vedanta Compared with Advaita

Advaita Vedanta originally developed alongside other Hindu traditions. If you look at another, more recent, branch of Vedanta, Dvaita Vedanta for instance, you'll see how its dualism contrasts with the non-dualism of Advaita Vedanta.

It's a reorientation of traditional Vedanta according to a philosophy of dualism distilled from its unique interpretation of the Vedas and Upanishads. It recognizes Brahman or Vishnu as the Supreme deity. This deity is part of a reality independent from the realm of humans and human souls, though not necessarily distinct. It is essentially unified but clouded in illusion behind the veil of Maya.



DID YOU KNOW

Dvaita Vedanta was founded in the 13th century of the Common Era by Shri Madhvacharya.

What sets Dvaita Vedanta apart from Advaita Vedanta is the strict separation of essences. Although the Supreme deity is eternal and controls the universe, he does assume a personal role in human affairs and the world. In this sense, there is a dualism in terms of dependence and independence, which is a characteristic of monotheism.

Brahman, according to Advaita, on the other hand, is more of a metaphysical principle than a personal god. It reveals a relatively strict monism in that Atman, the self beyond the ego, and Brahman, the cosmic, unchanging principle of reality beyond definition, are ultimately fused. They are identical, inseparable, and indistinguishable.



BIG IDEA

The two main distinctions of these two Vedanta schools are how the human and divine realms are characterized, as either dependent on or independent of each other. The second main distinction is how the exchange between these realms is understood: From the perspective of a relationship through difference and separation, which is Dvaita Vedanta, or a relationship of essential, primordial unity beyond all illusions of distinction, Advaita Vedanta.

Understanding the knowledge of the end, the Vedanta, and true self-knowledge are understood to be part of a unified essence. The dependent and independent dualism of Dvaita Vedanta is implicitly overcome in Advaita Vedanta.



SUMMARY

Theism, dualism, and monism are all aspects of Hinduism. Theism refers to the belief in a supreme creator god. Dualism exists in Hinduism because it can be thought of as both polytheistic and monotheistic. Monism refers to the unity of substance and essence. This means that many different things can be explained according to one principal idea. The **Advaita Vedanta** is the philosophy in Hinduism that Brahman and the Atman are not separate but unified. **Dvaita Vedanta compared with Advaita**, on the other hand, believes in dualism.



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