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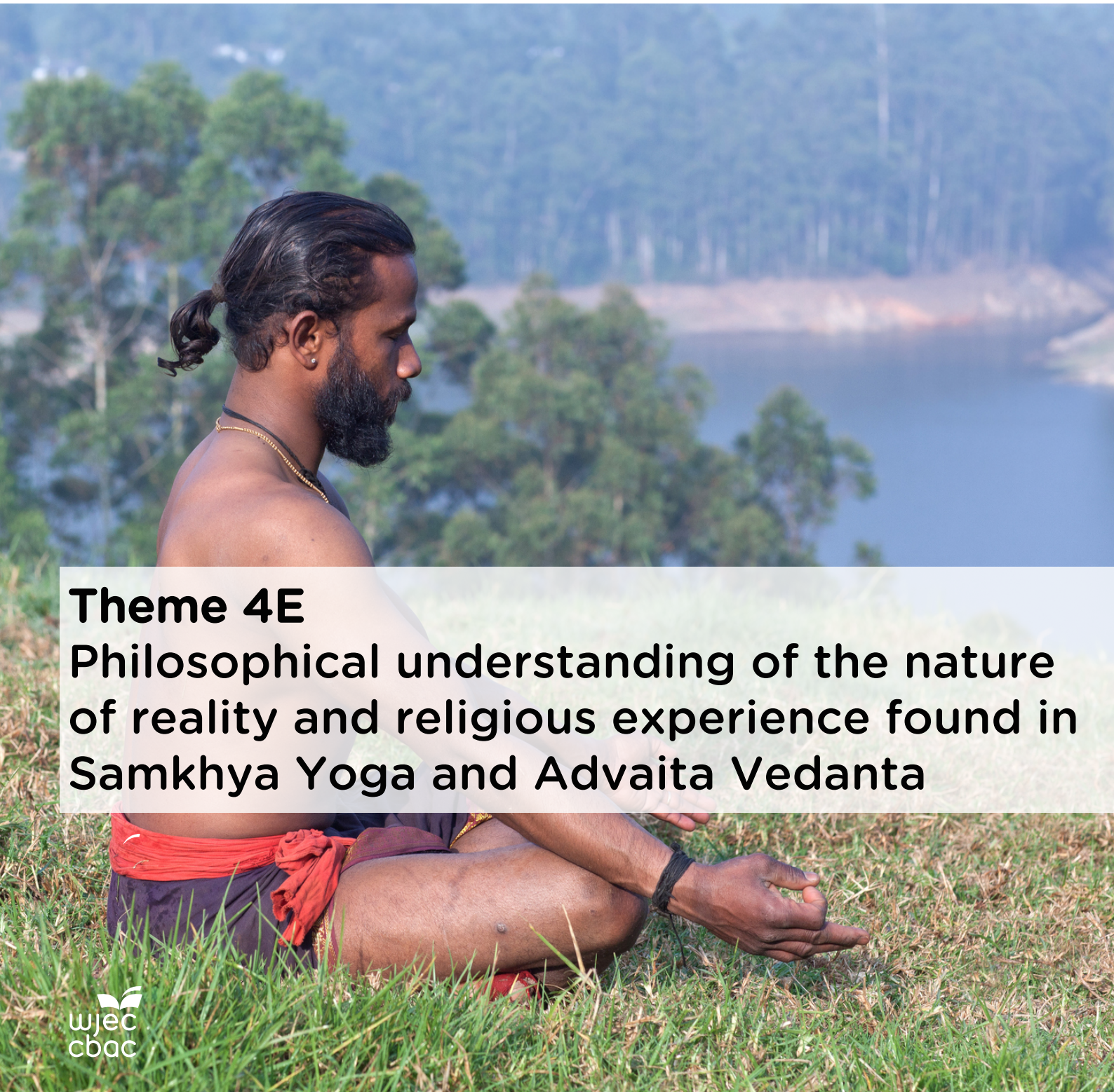

Theme 4E
Philosophical understanding of the nature of reality and religious experience found in Samkhya Yoga and Advaita Vedanta

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Glossary Key Terms

Adhyasa – Superimposition - the false identification of that which is with that which is not.

Advaita Vedanta – Non-dual Vedanta which teaches that that atman and Brahman are identical.

Jnana - Experiential knowledge of Brahman

Maitri Upanishad - An important ancient text which refers to elements of Samkya, yoga and ashrama.

Patanjali and ashtanga yoga – Yoga sutras compiled by Patanjali (the founder of Samkhyan Yoga) around 400CE. Regarded as one of the foundations of Hindu classical yoga philosophy.

Shankara – or Adi Shankara - Primary thinker of Advaita Vedanta.

Shvetashvatara Upanishad - A principle Upanishad which is very important in Shaivism and the Yoga and Vedanta schools of Hinduism.

three forms of Brahman - Ishvara, Prakriti and Atman; - personal, empirical, microcosmic.

the three gunas - Sattva, rajas and tamas; - three strands that make up prakriti – purity, passion, inertia.

Other useful terms

Dharshana- Hindu school of thought that include, Advaita Vedanta, Samkhya (Sankhya) Philosophy and Sankhya (Samkhya) Yoga.

Gunas – the 3 aspects of prakriti; sattva, rajas and tamas

Ishvara – God outside prakriti

Nirguna Brahman – Brahman without attributes

Mahvakyas – The Great Utterances by Advaita Vedanta about the nature of Brahman.

Saguna Brahman – Brahman with attributes

Samkhya philosophy – the understanding of purusha (spirit) and prakriti (physical).

Samkhya Philosophy, Sankhya Yoga and Advaita Vedanta are believed to be part of the Six Schools of Hindu Thought, known as the Darshanas. Darshana means 'seeing', as there are different ways in which the Hindu tradition try 'to seek God', just as people seek Brahman in the mandir through darshan.

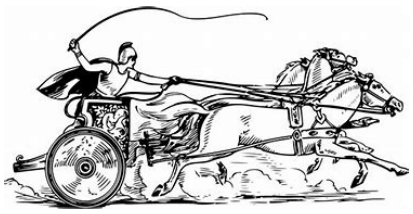
'*Darshana is also a philosophy that means seeing at a deeper level – seeing Reality*'

Dr Amrutur V. Srinivasan, Chapter 19, Hinduism for Dummies, For Dummies, 2011, ISBN:9780470878583

Therefore, Samkhya and Advaita Vedanta are not rivals but merely two different ways of reaching the divine, as part of the Hindu pluralistic society.

Development of Samkhya Philosophy

Samkhya (also spelt Sankhya) Philosophy is a way of understanding that there is both spirit (purusha) and matter (prakriti), therefore, it is a strong dualist system. Samkhya means either 'enumeration' or even 'calculation' and includes both renouncer traditions, but also the philosophical systems which has Hindu texts. This philosophy led to the more practical application of Samkhyan yoga, which was created by Patanjali (see section on Samkhya Yoga below). Dr G. Flood believes that this is more of a Brahmanical tradition because of the enumeration of categories. For example, the first 5 are self (purusha), matter (prakriti), higher mind (buddhi), ego (ahamkara) and finally mind (manas). The prakriti, material world is composed of 24 elements e.g. earth, fire, water space and air. It also includes 11 senses for example mind, smell and sight. Finally, it understands there are objects that form the senses e.g. odours and sounds. However, we also have a spiritual side of purusha, our atman. It is the atman's desire to fully realise our full self, detach itself form the physical world Prakriti) and be liberated from samsara. The idea is to control and withdraw the senses and focus on self-realisation, to liberate oneself from the physical entanglement of prakriti. We must use our ego and mind to aid us in the understanding of our true self and seek Samadhi. The idea is referred to in the Katha Upanishads, where it provides the example of a charioteer controlling the horses to guide the chariot (see Theme 1A Upanishads). This is where we need to control the senses of prakriti to understand purusha and reach Samadhi.



The chela or disciple needs to withdraw from the physical world (prakriti) to focus upon the spiritual essence of oneself (purusha) internally. Then a person can focus upon breath (prana) until everything is supressed, you concentrate purely on the atman. You can then decipher between what is truly atman and what is not atman. The practitioner will then reach 'enstasy' where they focus upon the truth, that is their true self. As a result, they will be released from karmic process of samsara and reach moksha - the Upanishads highlighted this idea (see Mairti Upanishad quote below). Also, the Smiriti Scripture of the Bhagavad Gita illustrates the understanding of the Gunas, known as prakriti but also the desire to withdraw from sense experience, gaining divine wisdom of Krishna as Ishvara (God outside Prakriti); *'When in recollection he withdraws all his sense from the attractions of pleasures of sense, even as a tortoise withdraws all its limbs, then his serene wisdom'* Bhagavad Gita 2v58.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna was told about the importance of discriminating between physical reality, which is the battle before him, and the spiritual self. The key point of Samkhyan Philosophy is to discriminate between prakriti and purusha and then dis-attach oneself from the entrapment of prakriti.

'T*he discipline of knowledge begins with 'the discipline of discrimination' (Sankhya yoga), recognition of the absolute distinction between the self and the permanence of the self alone."*

T. Hopkins

Hopkins, T., 'The Hindu Religious Tradition', (1971), Cengage Learning, ISBN:9780822100225, p.91.

Mairti Upanishad 18-19:

The practical method for coming to this oneness, releasing oneself from the confines of Prakriti consists of: breath-control, withdrawal of the senses from their objects, meditation, concentration, analytic discrimination and 'enstasy': this is known as Yoga, (it is) by this (yoga that)... men who Brahman know (in them) no imperfection can find a resting- place. Now, (this) too has been said elsewhere: When a wise man has to withdraw the mind from what is external, and breath (-control) has caused the objects of sense to disappear, then let him stand (mentally) still, forming no conceptions. Since the empirical self-called the 'breath of life' arose here (on this earth) from what is other than the breath of life, so should this empirical self, concentrate his (controlled) breathing on (the so-called) fourth state (which is beyond the waking state, the dream and dreamless sleep). What is not though in the midst of though abiding, unthinkable, the highest mystery – there fix they thought, (there) that subtle body, which has nothing to support it.'

This philosophy is not just a Hindu Darshana, Jains and Buddhist also follow this dharmic pathway. Furthermore, the later yogic system of Asana (specific postures) and Pranayama (focus on breathing) is common place in Western gyms. This tradition is called Hatha yoga and concentrates mainly on the body rather than the mind which Samkhya focuses on.

'this simplified form of yoga became widely known in the West as a result of large-scale immigration in the 1950-60s and has become a common feature of health clubs throughout Britain.'

Jennifer Smith

Smith J., Edexcel AS Religious Studies, 'Hinduism', (2006), Edexcel, ISBN:1846900018

Three Forms of Brahman – ishvara, prakriti and atman, the three gunas – sattva, rajas and tamas;

According to Samkhya Philosophy, Brahman consists of Ishvara, Prakriti and Atman.

Ishvara

Ishvara, meaning 'supreme soul', it is the spiritual, non-bodily aspect of Brahman. The Ishvara is the part of Brahman in which the jiva atman desires to connect to fully. To Patajali, Ishvara is the 'Transformative catalyst of guide of aiding the yogin on the path to spiritual emancipation' (Ian Whicher, 'The Integrity of the Yoga Darsana: A Reconsideration of Classical Yoga', SUNY Press, (1999), ISBN:9780791438152, p. 86). Furthermore, Ishvara is unaffected by the physical obstacles or karma. Ishvara is a special kind of self or pursha (spirit) that has never been interconnected with prakriti, the material world. This is the Nirguna Brahman (non-physical) aspect of this philosophy and usually attributed to the masculine side of Brahman. Ishvara is the part our atman wants to connect with and is done by controlling the ego and the mind. This idea of controlling the ego and mind is shown in the analogy of the chariot driver, using the reins to control the horses as shown in the Katha Upanishads.

Prakriti

One of the key differences between Samkhya Philosophy and Advaita Vedanta is that they accept both Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman. Prakriti is the physical world and links to the cosmic energy or shakti, which is the feminine side of Brahman.

The 3 Gunas

The word gunas means 'to twist'. Stephen Cross expands on the idea of Gunas: '*the Gunas are conceived as the three strands which, twist together, make up a rope. That rope is prakriti, the cosmic substance.*' (The Elements of Hinduism', Element Books Limited, (1996), ISBN:185230569, p.48).

The Gunas incorporate the qualities, which is within all nature, energy, matter and consciousness within the physical world. The three gunas are broken into 3 aspects called tamas, raja and sattva, which are all aspects of who Brahman is. These tendencies or gunas pervade everything, not just Brahman but also morality, character traits and food. Prakriti is the gunas, and consists of nothing other than them. Tamas is 'stationary'or 'decaying' or even referred to as 'lazy'. Shiva as the Saguna Brahman would be classified as this type of guna because he destroys, as part of samsara and stays still in a meditative state in Mahayogi. Tamas is also categorised within food and is usually linked to heavy puddings and meat. Raja meaning 'energy', 'creativity' or 'activity' is linked to Brahma, who created the world as stated in the Vedas. The type of food associated with this guna is hot and spicy food that provide energy and passion. The final guna, is sattva which is 'purity' and 'goodness', being the highest dharmic understanding; shown through Vishnu, the preserver and maintainer of Dharma (rta). The foods

associated with thus aspect of the the gunas are usually rice, vegetables, fruit and milk. Many yogis believe that having a sattvic (pure) diet will clear the mind of toxins and allowing you to focus on enlightenment. The 3 gunas are believed to be present in everyone, but some people have more proportions of one guna than another. Prakriti illustrates that Brahman, as saguna, is in control of samsara, which is not maya (the power by which a God can make human beings believe in what is in fact an illusion) as the Advaita Vedanta philosophy states.

Atman

The jiva atman (individual soul), is a part or aspect of Brahman that is also known as the soul. This aspect of Brahman is trapped in prakriti, in the physically world of samsara which is very appealing to many. The atman might enjoy being part the physical world because it links to the senses and enjoyment of life (kama). However, attachment to the gunas is negative because it will not aid a person to get to moksha.

Jamison. 'By the atman's continued entanglement in the gunas it becomes subject to karma, and is thus trapped in samsara.'

Jamison, I. – Hinduism, (2006), Philip Allan Updates, ISBN:1844894207

Liberation of the atman from prakriti to moksha is by detaching yourself from the material world by using Jnana (knowledge of Brahman). The quote below shows the entrapment of the soul and how it can be escaped through jnana (knowledge) of Brahman.

This is shown in the Shvetashvatara Upanishad 5:7, 12-13:

'He who has gunas, is a goer of deeds that bear fruit, and enjoyer of what he has done. Following the three paths, characterised by three gunas, and assuming all forms, he roams about (in successive rebirths) according to his actions. The embodied one (atman) chooses forms, gross and subtle according to his qualities. Because of his union with these forms brought about by the qualities of his actions and his embodied self he is seen as something other than he is. He is released from all his bondage when he comes to know Brahman, the one embracer of all this universe, who in the midst of chaos is without beginning and end, who having manifold form, is the creator of all this.'

The founder of Sankhya Yoga is Patanjali (400CE), who wanted to give his followers practical guidance on how to escape prakriti. This practical application also became another Dharsharna, Hindu Philosophical School of Thought. Patanjali developed a yoga to enable us to change the way we see the world and realise the true identity of the atman. As a result he called his yoga Citta-Vritti-Nirodha, (Citta – consciousness, Vritti – fluctuations – Nirodhah – quieting of) meaning the suppression of the fluctuation of the mind. It is a practical yoga, that combines the physical and philosophical disciplines together. It is an eightfold pathway to enable a person to understand the true reality through clearer lenses of our clouded mind. This eightfold yogic practice is called astanga yoga or 'eight limbs', which help you achieve Samadhi or Enstasy (a state in which the mind is only conscious of the object of focus (God) and has no notion as the 'self' or 'perceiver' – the meditator and object of meditation are as one).

The eight stages are :

1) Yama (restraint)- these are moral codes required to be followed in order to be morally good. It is sometimes called the 5 restraints because there are 5 aspects that need to be focused on e.g. ahimsa (non-violence), satya (being truthful), asteya (not desiring other people's possessions), brahmacharya (sexual control, not to be promiscuous) and finally aparigraha (letting go of possessions, including your body).

2) Niyama (Positive observances)- this practice supports the yamas and focus on virtuous habits. This practice is to enable a person to reach self-realisation. In Patanjali's yoga sutras he gave 5 ways in which to have positive observances: purity, contentment, austerity to build tapas (ascetic energy), study of self and contemplation on Ishvara.

3) Asana (yogic postures) – This is the posture control which has both physical and mental benefits. Patanjali explains Asana *as 'to be seated in the position that is firm but relaxed.'* This makes the Chela (disciple) aware of the prakriti of the body and to have control of it. This manipulation of the body in postures gives the Chela/disciple flexibility and strength to allow the flow of spiritual energy (prana) to flow through the body. This practice of Asana is seen in many gyms in British leisure centres.

'For many Western practitioners of yoga this stage is all that is important, but for those following this spiritual path it is comparatively little importance.' Jamison.

Jamison, I. – Hinduism, (2006), Philip Allan Updates, ISBN:1844894207.

4) **Pranayama (life force extension)** - this is control of breathing. This practice is not just breathing in and out but controlling the follow of divine energy within us. *'When there is movement of the prana in the appropriate channels, then there is movement in consciousness and mind arises', Swami Venkantesananda, Vasistha Yoga, SUNY Press, 1993, ISBN: 0791413640,* p. 316. The breathing can aid the practitioner in controlling the Prakriti of your body, for example when you have slow controlled breathing you are usually calm but if you have erratic fast breathing you might be angry.

5) **Pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses) -** this is the bridge between the external prakriti and the internal purusha. This is now the stepping stone towards the detachment of prakriti. Once you have control over the senses you can then just focus the mind on Ishvara and seek Samadhi - a state in which the mind is only conscious of the object of focus (God) and has no notion as the 'self' or 'perceiver' – the meditator and object of meditation are as one.

6) **Dharana (Concentration)** - this practice is now focusing the mind on either a physical object like a murti or an internal object like a chakra (wheel/circle) in the body. Chakras are key focal points in the body that run along the spinal cord.

7) **Dhyana (meditation)-** this practise focuses upon a single thought in a person's mind. The chela become completely focused upon meditation and stepping completely away form physical world.

8) Samadhi (Enstasy) – This is where the chela/disciple is now at the point of true realisation of atman and there is no disturbance of the mind from the external world. It is a state in which the mind is only conscious of the object of focus (God) and has no notion as the 'self' or 'perceiver' – the meditator and object of meditation are as one.

The chela has completely detached itself from prakriti. Now the self exists in perfect, isolated, blissful consciousness, like a totally smooth pond without a single ripple of awareness to disturb it. It is where you are in complete control of yourself and are in complete union with Ishvara.

Meaning of Advaita (Advaita Vedanta)

Vedanta is another branch of the Darshana (Hindu schools of thought). Advaita means 'not two ' – and Vedanta, 'knowledge'. Vedanta is jnana marga or jnana yoga, the pathway of knowledge. This is the oldest Darshana (Hindu school of thought). This tradition's main scholar was Adi Shankara in the 8th century. Advaita Vedanta believes that the atman and Brahman are one and the same, making it a non-dualist philosophy. Its roots stem from the Upanishad's teachings, that Brahman is identical to our inner self (atman). The most famous phase in the Upanishads states 'Tat tvam asi', meaning you are that, or Brahman.

"The Hindu scriptures insist that there is only one God and that the entire Universe is nothing other than an appearance of this Supreme Spirit." A. Sharma

Sharma, A., Classical Hindu Thought, (2012), D.K. Printworld Ltd, ISBN:8124606439

Therefore, everything in the world is an expression of God, every living thing has Brahman residing inside them. There are hundreds of verses that support this idea that God can exist in trees, dogs, the moon, and even small particles, etc. This idea has massively influenced the practice of ahimsa, reverence for all life and diminishes the importance of varna, because we all have Brahman within and therefore, there is not distinction with any human or animal. Therefore, Brahman is impersonal as you are not trying to have a relationship or connection with God like Bhakti yoga; with Advaita Vedanta, you just need to realise you are Brahman.

This school of thought developed the Mahavakyas or 'or great utterances' which describe who Brahman is. For example, 'Brahman is the supreme knowledge' and 'All of this is Brahman'. These utterances are taken from the Upanishads and believed to be the great explanations of Brahman. The key argument is that Brahman is noncorporeal, having no attributes (Nirguna Brahman) and he is beyond our understanding.

(Svetashvatara Upanishad 6:11)

"There is only one God, who resides deep inside all objects and beings. He is everywhere and the inner self of all."

Understanding Brahman as Nirguna

This Vedanta mainly agree that Brahman is Nirguna (without attributes) because we cannot describe a spiritual being. Shankara, the founder of Advaita Vedanta believed Brahman cannot be described in any way as he is non-corporeal (non-bodily). In the Birhadranyaka Upanishad they state that Brahman is 'neti neti', meaning 'not this, not this'. If you try to describe God, it will never be accurate

due to the omniscience of God being beyond our understanding. The use of idol worship is meaningless to some because it only shows you a minute aspect of Brahman. A key problem of Saguna Brahman is that you can't physically describe God because he is non-physical in the first place. For an Advaita, God is present but you cannot see him. In the Chandogya Upanishad, Uddalaka made his son Svetaketu drink salt water different times, each time it 'tasted saltish', to show that even though you cannot see the salt you can taste it in the water. Highlighting the key teaching of Nirguna Brahman; God is everywhere in the universe, but you cannot see him.

Influence of Shankara (aka Shankaracharya)

Shankara also known as Shankaracharya is believed to have been born around c700CE and died in India c750CE. He is the most renowned scholar of the Advaita Vedanta dashana. He wrote the Brahma Sutra which is believed to be '*the single most influential philosophical text today... standing at the pinnacle of Indian philosophical compositions'*, Stephen Cross ('The Elements of Hinduism', Element Books Limited, (1996), ISBN:185230569, p.55)

Adi Shankara was named Shankarachrya which is a common name for the head of monasteries in the Advaita Vedanta, Darshana (Hindu School of Thought). It is believed at the age of 10 he was seen by many gurus as a spiritually intelligent student. He memorised many key Hindu texts and understood the complexities of these ideas. As a result, of his deep understanding of the Vedas and Upanishads, he was unhappy with what his gurus were teaching him. He was shocked at the materialistic focus on artha within dharmic teachings. Therefore, at a very early life he asked his mother's permission for him to be Sannyasin. He became a disciple under the teachings of the Shaivite Govinda Bhagavatapada. This is where he continued in-depth study of the Vedas and Upanishads. He wrote commentaries on the Mukhya Upanishads (the Principle Upanishads), which were the most widely studied Upanishads in Hinduism. He commented on 10 of these key Upanishads, that were mostly connected to the atman being Brahman. He travelled around India widely debating his philosophical ideas of Advaita Vedanta and created monastic centres called Peethams or Maths. There were 4 main centres at the cardinal points of India where one of each 4 Vedas are studied e.g. in Govardhan Math at Puru (East India), they study the Rig Veda. While travelling India, Shankara would avidly fight against the teachings of Buddhism. While some of the Buddhist teachings were similar to Shankara's, for example the levels of reality; Shankara fought against the atheistic ideals of Buddhism, claiming that they are ignoring the Divine within.

Shankaras teachings on the Three Levels of Reality

As discussed earlier, Brahman is the only true reality, that cannot be described but he is all-pervading within every living thing. According to the Advaita Vedanta darshana, Brahman is real and anything other than Brahman is falsehood or Maya (illusion). One of the Great Utterances or Mahvakyas explains this idea 'Brahman is real; the world is unreal'. This darshana decided to state what was reality and what was not reality. Therefore, Shankara developed the 3 stages of reality:

The Illusory level of Reality

This is the subjective reality, where we may dream at night or even day dream. Most people would recognise that this is not a true reality and false.

The Mundane level of reality

This reality is more familiar to us because it is our world that we know, through our empirical sense. Our taste, touch, smell is not the true reality of God. God's essence is not seen, but known through jnana yoga (the path of knowledge). In this reality we superimpose (Adhyasa – see next sub-section) our beliefs of reality and God in this world. We therefore have an illusionary understanding of God, and we are ignorant (avidya) to the knowledge of God. This is where Advaita Vendanta would reject the Samkhyan Philosophy of prakriti and the 3 gunas.

The Ultimate level of reality

The Ultimate Reality is Brahman, which many people refer to Brahman as. This is where we realise that Brahman is within, we are part of Brahman and the mundane reality distracts or confuses us from this. This was one of the reasons that Shankara believed that worshipping God as Saguna (physical attributes) was a lower level of understanding because it stops you realising that Brahman is within, as you are worshipping outwardly instead of understanding the Ultimate Reality inwardly. This could be the level that was referred to in the Vedas as the 'world of the gods'. The awareness of us being part of Brahman leads us out of Samsara and to be released to moksha.

The idea of adhyasa – superimposition

Adhyasa means 'superimposition' or 'falsely thinking one thing is something else'. For example, we might think we see a lamppost in the distance, but when we get up close we then notice it is a tree. We do this in life, we superimpose our ideas that Brahman is just Shiva, or Indra etc.

'Thus if I think a rope is a snake I can continue to believe this till something in my experience contradicts the belief, such as the failure of the rope to move when trodden on'. McDermott.

McDermott, G.R. 'World Religions', Harper Collins, (2011), ISBN:978418545970.

Until we seek Brahman through jnana yoga we will constantly do adhyasa. We are in an illusion or maya. We think that this empirical reality is Brahman. Until we escape this understanding we will still go through the cycle of Samskara. Adi Shankara defines adhyasa as *"the apparent presentation, to consciousness, by way of remembrance of something previously observed in some other thing"* (from Self-Realization [Brahmaanubhav]: The Advaitic Perspective of Shankara, edited by Vensus A. George, (2001), Council for Research in Values, p.77, ISBN: 9781565181540).

Zaehner puts this very clearly, '*Moksha, then for Advaitin, does not mean that the soul merges into Brahman as a river merges into the sea, but that it realizes itself as it eternally is, that is, as the One Brahman-Atman, which is Absolute Being, Consciousness, and Bliss' (Chit, Sat Ananda)* (found in Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism, by Norman Anderson, 1984, InterVarsity Press, p.90, ISBN: 9780877849810)

Issues for discussion:

1) The relative successes of Samkhya and Advaita Vedanta philosophies in explaining the true relationship between God and humanity.

2) Is Samkyan yoga the best way to reach moksha?

3) The extent to which Brahman can be understood as Nirguna.

4) Is this world really an illusion?

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Potter, K. H., 'Encyclopaedia of Indian Philosophies Volume 3', Princeton University Press, (2014), ISBN:9780691614861

Swami Bhaskaranand, 'Journey from Many to One - Essentials of Advaita Vedanta', Viveka Press, (2009), ISBN:9781884852121

Zimmer, H., 'Myths and symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation', Princeton University Press, (2017), ISBN:9780691176048 which contains A. K. Commaraswaymy's essay, 'The Dance of Shiva'

Other Useful Resources

https://resources.eduqas.co.uk/Pages/ResourceSingle.aspx?rlid=1246

Eduqas Component 1E: Hinduism Scheme of Work

Websites

https://www.britannica.com/topic/Samkhya

an Encyclopaedia Britannica article on Samkhya.

http://www.indianphilosophy.50webs.com/samkhya.htm

an Indian Philosophy article on Samkhya.

https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ishvara

an Encyclopaedia Britannica article on Ishvara.