

Between One and Zero, Brahman and Śūnyatā: Same but Different, Different but SameDagyung Jung¹**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the philosophical similarities and differences between Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism, two major Indian traditions concerned with consciousness, liberation, etc. While Advaita Vedānta sees Brahman as the singular, eternal reality underlying all existence, Buddhism emphasizes Śūnyatā, teaching that all phenomena are impermanent and devoid of inherent essence. The research compares how each tradition conceptualizes ultimate reality symbolized as binary code “1(one)” in Advaita Vedānta and “0(zero)” in Buddhism, arguing that these expressions, though seemingly opposed, may ultimately point to the same truth through different linguistic frameworks. It also examines how both traditions use language metaphorically to express what lies beyond words. The paper discusses how Indian philosophy, particularly Advaita Vedānta, integrates theoretical insight with practical methods like yoga and meditation for self-realization. In contrast, modern Buddhism, especially in Korea and China, has evolved to focus more on mental well-being and social harmony rather than the pursuit of enlightenment. Finally, the study calls for a broader understanding of these philosophies not as conflicting, but as complementary sources of timeless wisdom. By highlighting their shared emphasis on direct experience and transcendence of ego, it presents them as relevant guides for contemporary life across cultures.

Keywords: Brahman, Śūnyatā, Advaita Vedānta, Buddhism.

Introduction

Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism, two major philosophical traditions that originated from India, offer distinct perspectives on the nature of reality and the principles governing the world. While they differ in their methods of inquiry and metaphysical views, they share fundamental concerns regarding the nature of the self, suffering, and happiness. Advaita Vedānta, deeply rooted in the Upaniṣadic tradition, continues to play a central role in Indian philosophy and spiritual life, maintaining its influence within India. In contrast, Buddhism, though it originated from India, has flourished primarily in East Asia, and more recently in Europe and the United States, gaining a wide following as a global religion. By comparing the similarities and differences between the two schools of thought that originated from the same roots but have gone through different development processes through the language they express, this work would shed light on the meaning and value these two traditions have for people in their lives today.

In this study, firstly, the ultimate conception of reality as defined by each of the two traditions will be explored by the so-called object name of God. Secondly, it will be examined how each school views the metaphysical concepts and their significance by replacing the main idea of each school with binary code “1(one)” and “0(zero)”. Finally, it can be analyzed how the similarities and differences between Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism can be applied to contemporary life and assess their practical implications, especially in China and South Korea.

Although the foundational teachings of the Advaita Vedānta school and Buddhism were originally transmitted orally, their key doctrines and philosophical arguments were eventually codified in written texts. Therefore, it is essential to investigate how these central ideas are articulated and supported through language, as this provides insight into the distinctive ways each tradition constructs and conveys its worldview.

Thought on Consciousness

The Advaita Vedānta school of Nondualism posits that Brahman is the one ultimate, unchanging truth underlying all existence. This singular reality, though itself without attributes, is understood to encompass within it the multiplicity of phenomena experienced in the world, which are seen as its intrinsic expressions or manifestations. As suggested in the text, *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 6.2.3, “bahu syām prajāyeye (बहु स्यां प्रजायेये; I shall be many),” Brahman expresses itself as the diversity of the cosmos while ultimately remaining one. In this framework, all properties and forms ultimately trace their origin back to this singular source. Advaita Vedānta thus maintains that while reality appears as a multitude of external entities, these are not independent truths but

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rather expressions of a single reality. Consequently, it is appropriate to engage with the world as it appears, fulfilling one's bodily and worldly responsibilities, while simultaneously seeking to transcend external reality through knowledge and realization of Brahman. This dual engagement with both relative reality and ultimate reality is what leads to liberation and enduring bliss.

According to *Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad*, Brahman is the cause of everything and the omniscient Jīva, from which everything originates and to which everything returns. In Indian philosophy, the all-encompassing God is called Brahman, and it has a vast meaning like the universe, but the limited God called Ātman refers to ourselves, the humans. Ultimately, we, each of us, who are the microcosm of the universe and the gods, exist in correspondence with each other.

In contrast, Buddhism teaches that the world is permeated by suffering and that what one perceives as reality is ultimately a constructed illusion, empty of inherent existence and constantly in flux. From this perspective, all phenomena, including the sensory experiences of daily life, are transient and insubstantial. The doctrine of emptiness, Śūnyatā, particularly emphasized in Mahāyāna Buddhism, holds that nothing possesses an independent or permanent essence. This view offers psychological and spiritual support by helping individuals detach from worldly attachments and overcome suffering. However, it also leads to the understanding that since all things are impermanent and interdependent, no single, fixed truth can be articulated. Language, therefore, is seen as a limited tool useful for guiding understanding but ultimately incapable of capturing absolute truth. True insight or intuition is said to lie beyond conceptual thought and linguistic expression, often described as a kind of liberating silence or direct experiential realization. While this perspective can be deeply freeing, it may also provoke existential questioning or skepticism in some practitioners, particularly when confronting the notion that even the self and the world are ultimately illusory.

In order to compare the two perspectives above, it can be suggested to think about how the ultimate reality is understood from a secular perspective through the concept of God. The highest truth or reality is often referred to in religion as God.¹ What is the God generally assumed? When we refer to God, we mean the realm that is beyond human capabilities, and we invoke God when we consider things that are beyond human ability, such as natural disasters and problems that cannot be solved through endless effort. Conceptions of God in classical traditions such as theism, monotheism, pantheism, panentheism, or of the supreme deity in henotheistic

religions can extend to various levels of abstraction. If the concept of God is something that we humans have created, then at the very least, we should be able to explain exactly what that God is. However, each position on God is different. Different religions explain God in other ways, and each explains God in a different language.

Hindus, for instance, believe in many gods and goddesses, including Brahman, and also believe that God created the world from his being, and that God is both immanent and transcendent. Christians believe in a loving God who created the world and is known through the relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit. Muslims believe in Allah, a powerful but unknowable God who created the world. The Quran states that God reveals his will, but not his person. Buddhists do not believe in a deity; however, they make statues of Buddha and pray to him.

Meanwhile, the way Indian tradition explains God is as follows. New concepts in India appear in a wide variety of forms, covering a wide range such as monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, monism, agnosticism, and atheism. However, if we narrow down the scope to modern Hinduism, it can be understood as four types: Vaiṣṇavasampradāyaḥ, Śaivasampradāyaḥ, Śāktasampradāyaḥ, and Smārta. Their characteristics are manifested in the fact that they worship Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Devī as supreme gods, while they are posited as Brahman, the eternal, formless, metaphysical absolute. This is no different from the ultimate concept of Brahman, which was widely preached by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, a Vedic scholar in India around the 8th century. So, the new concept of God in India can be understood as more pantheistic than monotheistic.

There are also several different views on Consciousness in Vedānta philosophy, which is the foundation of Hinduism. One of them is Advaita Vedānta, and Advaita literally means non-dualism, and this explains that there is only one eternal entity named Brahman. Secondly, there is Dvaita Vedānta, which is dualism. This rejects the notion of Advaita Vedānta and mainly asserts that there is a duality between Jīva and Īśvara. Thirdly, there is Dvaitadvait and it highlights that in between Jīva and Brahman, there is a difference but also non-difference. In this way, it is more like compromising two ideas, dualism and non-dualism. Fourthly, Viśiṣṭādvaita, as claimed by Rāmānuja, is a notion that retains the ontological distinction between Jīva and Brahman, but here the Jīva is dependent on the quality of Brahman. It is considered non-duality but with distinction.

Regarding Consciousness in Vedānta philosophy, there already are several distinguished notions, however still how can we define the microcosm of the self in a relation with the ultimate truth? We do not

¹ Pande (1994), p. 175.

know much about ourselves. What we know about ourselves is largely related to material information. We collect information about ourselves through a series of countless experiences: what we like, what we eat and drink, what we spend most of our time doing, what makes us happy, and what makes us suffer. However, this does not allow us to delve into the core of oneself, and one continues to hover around the periphery.

On the other hand, how can one ultimately recognize that there is no separation between “I” and the universe, and that “I” become ultimately one with the entire universe? How can this be possible with any tool? This is actually beyond the material scope of reason, logic, and the mind, and is only possible at a point of enlightenment where one encounters the truth. In other words, through immediate enlightenment through direct experience. Of course, achieving this enlightenment momentarily and maintaining the enlightenment moment forever are two different things.

In Buddhism, the Buddha, seeking to escape all suffering experienced in the world, refused to simply accept the Vedas as the divine origin, Śruti. Instead, he left home early and experimented directly, seeking to understand the source of suffering through extreme experiences. However, he realized that even if he practiced as part of enlightenment, he could never achieve enlightenment through acts of physical torture or through the use of phenomenological reality. Ultimately, he concluded by not accepting any reality but denying it altogether. Nevertheless, through denial alone, he faced the difficulty of clearly explaining the existence of phenomena, even if they were illusions. However, according to the Japanese scholar Sasaki, the negation method used in Buddhism is not simply aimed at negation, but rather carries a positive goal of signifying a greater truth. In other words, since truth cannot be directly expressed through language, it is a method of indirectly expressing what is already known by denying it or by utilizing concepts that are its opposite.¹ This is very similar to the negation of Advaita Vedānta, which will be discussed below. On the other hand, the Buddha also found himself remaining silent, remaining between words, offering an answer.

The reason why Indian tradition, which explains God, the holy truth, is considered more comprehensive and excellent in terms of methodology than Western philosophy is that Indian philosophy not only discusses the problem of the world principle and the self in theoretical or conceptual terms, but also emphasizes the

performative and practical aspects. It is difficult to explain the cosmic principles rationally through logic based on verbal expressions because of the expressive limitations of language.

Language of both Traditions

The School of Advaita Vedānta explains the ultimate truth through the method of negation, asserting the existence of one ultimate truth that is unchanging as the highest concept that encompasses countless individual gods. For example, “neti neti (नेति नेति)” means “not this, not this,” or “neither this, nor that.”² This is used for explaining one truth because truth is a concept that cannot be defined in words.³ The moment when expressions describe the traits or characters of the object, it will end up in a self-contradiction. Due to the limitations of language and the senses, the Ṛṣis explained Consciousness through various analogies based on their direct experience. This analogy is intended for humans who use language.

On the other hand, when it is considered in language use of Buddhism, the term “Vijñāna (विज्ञान)” meaning “cognitive knowledge,” “science” can be interpreted as an interaction between a subject and an object that occurs in a limited time through awareness of difference by the function of the sense organs through a certain stimulus, as can be seen in a prefix √Vi meaning “separation” or “distinction.”⁴ Ādi Śaṅkara, who advocates the non-duality, denies this very Buddhist concept of discernment, because distinction ultimately presupposes a “twoness”—a distinct entity, like a subject or an object. In this way, Ādi Śaṅkara perceives the school of Yoga as a lower level of knowledge than the Advaita Vedānta school. Because Yoga, too, has the meaning and goal of “binding,” “contact between two,”⁵ this presupposes, like Buddhism, a distinct “two.”⁶

Meanwhile, as another example, the Advaita Vedānta school divides the ontological level into three levels: Prāthibhāsika (apparent reality or unreality), Vyāvahārika (empirical or pragmatical), and Pāramārthika (the absolute level). Similarly, Buddhist Yogācāra divides it into three levels: Parikalpita (imaginary), Paratantrika (dependent or empirical reality), and Paramarthaika (transcendental reality). While each of these three levels is similarly organized in the second and third levels, it manifests differently in the first. While the Vedānta defines and acknowledges material reality, including dreams, as a veiled reality, Buddhism rejects material reality, dismissing it as a nonexistent realm of the imagination,

¹ Sasaki (1992), p.1.

² Bṛhadāraṇyakoṣaḍ 2.3.6. अथात आदेशः—नेति नेति, न ह्येतस्मादिति नेत्यन्यत्परमस्ति; अथ नामधेयम्—सत्यस्य सत्यमिति; प्राणा वै सत्यम्, तेषामेष सत्यम् ॥३॥

³ Sawai (2015), p. 134.

⁴ Waldron (2022), p. 128.

⁵ Māṇḍūkya-karika, p. 200.

⁶ Hacker (1995), pp. 122-23.

characterized by emptiness and dependence on something else.

But is the one unchanging truth (1—oneness) assumed by Advaita Vedānta different from the Śūnyatā or voidness (0—zero) assumed by Buddhism? This difference in verbal expression or numerical expression has led to sharp confrontations and debates between the two groups in the past. But does this difference mean that the two arguments are forever on parallel lines that cannot be reconciled? At first glance, it may seem that there is only a conflict between the binary code “1” and “0,” which symbolize the two, but in reality, they are linguistic differences and are essentially the same. This difference arises from their differing perspectives on acknowledging the physical reality as it is or considering it an illusion.

After all, what the Advaita Vedānta school and the Buddhist school assert is that the individual self disappears or the individual perspective is infinitely expanded or melted as an intrinsic act of expression. Buddhism is about the disappearance of the individual self, which is named as Śūnyatā, converging to zero, while Advaita Vedānta is about the expansion of the individual self, eventually leading to the disappearance of the boundary between the self and many other transformed selves, and to infinite eternity.

So, what is the main problem with the difference in perspective between “0 (referred to Śūnyatā)” and “1 (referred to Brahman)?” Ultimately, claiming that the two are different from the perspective of binary code “0” and “1” is like trapping oneself again in the limitations of language. Computer technology developed by humans tries to explain everything in the world with 0s and 1s, and it does. We understand the physical and phenomenological world, known as Māyā, through a matrix in which countless combinations of the two numerical data, “0” and “1,” appear, and we also embody the world through these two symbols.

“1” and “0” exist like the weft and warp of fabric, making weft into warp and warp into weft. For example, “0-1 (zero-one),” which is one, and “1-0 (one-zero),” which became ten, are just two different orders of writing the numbers “0” and “1,” but they produce completely different results. Taking Taoism as an example, there was “1” in the beginning, and there was light that acted as the trigger for the development of the one into yin and yang. Without the external energy, power, or role of light, “1” would have to exist in the state of “1” forever, which means “0 status”. Likewise, “1” is non-functional by itself, but the agent here, such as “0,” delivers it into functionality. It is also applicable to “0” in the same way.

Also, “0” and “1” are not only numbers that represent opposite properties. For example, they are not

symbols that are opposed to each other, unlike the expressions of light and darkness, up and down, sun and moon, and positive and negative. If we assume and understand “0” and “1” as nothingness and existence, which refer to opposite attributes to each other, there may be such misunderstandings, but “0” and “1” represented by numerical symbols are on the same line. In the case of “0.999999999...,” how should we distinguish this as “0” or “1”?

As spoken above, the different ways of expressing the concepts of Consciousness in Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism are expressed numerically using the binary code “0” and “1”. Referring back to the earlier point, a single form or name cannot define the Indian concept of holistic view. It has various features, but its unique nature, although not easily expressed in language, is considered to be the same regardless of religion or philosophy. In this way, many Rṣis, Seers, and Sages all kept experimenting by themselves to realize the reality of Consciousness directly.

Influence of Different Concepts on Consciousness

When analyzing the current state of Korean Buddhism, it's important to note that the goal of modern Buddhists—especially Buddhist practice—is not enlightenment or liberation, but rather the promotion of happiness for themselves and others (Cho 148). Buddha, seeking to escape the suffering of joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, left home to pursue spiritual practice, ultimately achieving enlightenment. However, modern Buddhists, in their Buddhist practice, yearn not to abandon life and attain enlightenment, but rather to overcome the suffering inherent in life and find happiness within themselves, their families, and society. In other words, their primary concern is not to abandon reality and escape, nor to simply seek enlightenment regarding the causes of suffering and how to end it, but to live more happily and effectively in their present reality.

So how can these problems be overcome? Modern Buddhism is being called upon to answer the question: what alternatives can Buddhism offer beyond its teachings of living a moderate life, free from attachment and self-denial, and ultimately transcending reality to pursue a practice that embraces this principle?

For example, in China, training programs are implemented within temples to help people learn martial arts such as kung fu and take care of their health.¹ Another example is that it serves as a practical educational institution that helps people prepare for death in advance without having a negative perception of it through weekly death education on taboo subjects such as death. In Korea, too, programs like temple stays provide a time and place for not only Buddhists but also

¹ <https://shaolintemplehenan.com/>

the general public to visit mountain temples, reducing stress and finding peace of mind. They also introduce vegetarian natural food, such as temple food, and provide opportunities to learn how to cook it.

However, these practical prescriptions alone are unlikely to change people's perceptions of Buddhism or provide opportunities for proper philosophical understanding. From a philosophical and academic perspective, we also need to consider how religion can offer guidance for human life. Recently, books on Buddhism have become incredibly popular in Korea, selling well. People seek to satisfy their intellectual hunger and gain lifelong wisdom through Buddhism. There is a positive view that Indian spiritual values are based on the sacredness of human beings, unlike those in the West, which are merely a means of moral discipline, and thus can help restore human spirituality and achieve happiness through Indian philosophy.¹

What can be gained from the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta discussed above? We need to seriously consider what aspects of Buddhism and the Buddha's teachings we need to reexamine and improve. In the past, religion in Korea was closely related to daily life, such as weddings, funerals, social norms, and education. However, recently, the number of people who claim to be non-religious has outnumbered those who claim to be Christians, Buddhists, or other religious affiliations. In other words, religion has become specialized. However, rather than existing for a select few who aim to attain enlightenment through monasticism, as in the Buddhist tradition, religion can positively influence a wider range of people as a guide, discipline, or discipline of life.

One of the major differences between Advaita Vedānta philosophy and Buddhism is that Advaita Vedānta is the product of wisdom excavated from the accumulated experiences of many sages. In contrast, Buddhism is a selective compilation of the enlightenment of a single person, the Buddha. The scholars who championed Advaita Vedānta and inherited it did not claim to possess their enlightenment. Instead, they sought to understand the truths they experienced through commentaries, interpreting the condensed and concise teachings of numerous sages. Buddhism, on the other hand, is a religious system selectively compiled and developed by the Buddha's disciples and laypeople after his death. This may differ from the Buddha's own experiences, thoughts, or intentions.

In Advaita Vedānta philosophy, Ādi Śaṅkara considers yoga, broadly speaking, and meditation, narrowly speaking, as tools for purifying the mind.²³ For example, he posits that prejudices about good and bad, accumulated through experience and existing as memories, generate further mental suffering. Buddhism uses a method of meditation that keeps one awake and holds one's mind in that state only. For example, the concept of Zen in Buddhism is a method in which a teacher makes a disciple let go of his or her ego as a void status. Starting from there, gain enlightenment in the moment through Zen questions that may seem foolish. Long years of practice do not necessarily lead to enlightenment, so this method is effective even though it is not always right. In Daoism, too, through a method of questioning and answering called Kōan, one drives the ego into the background and fills the vacant place of the ego with enlightenment.

Conclusion

In this paper, the similarities and differences in Consciousness between Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism are compared, with particular emphasis on their linguistic expressions. The major influences these traditions continue to exert in the modern world are also analyzed.

Typically, when studying Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism in the academic world, the focus is on their differences or the debate over which argument or theory is more valid based on those differences. However, considering the positive impact that Indian philosophy and religions originating from India can have on people, it is necessary to identify commonalities between the two, what they can learn from each other, and to impart knowledge that Western philosophy cannot offer to modern generations, serving as a guide. This is because the wisdom passed down to us from the ancient prophets is priceless and, above all, is always available to those who seek it.

When we truly understand the truth hidden behind the human-created concept or illusion of God and strive to put that truth into practice, that knowledge will truly reveal its value, and it will be recognized as invaluable wisdom beyond the regional boundaries of India for those struggling with real-world difficulties.

¹ Kim (2015), p. 112.

² Upadeśasāhasrī V17.23. शरीरादि तपः कुर्यत्तद्विशुद्धर्थमुत्तमम् । मनभादिसमाधानं तत्ते विश्लेषणम् ॥२३॥

³ Bhagavad-gītā 17.15~17.16. अनुद्वेगकरं वाक्यं सत्यं प्रियहितं च यत् । स्वाध्यायाभ्यसनं चैव वाङ्मयं तप उच्यते ॥ १५॥ मनः प्रसादः सौम्यत्वं मौनमात्मविनिग्रहः । भावसंशुद्धिरित्येतत्तपो मानसमुच्यते ॥ १६॥

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