

The Concept of self: A Comparative study between Buddhism and Vedanta

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Abstract- This study offers a comparative philosophical analysis of Advaita Vedānta and Mahāyāna Buddhism (with emphasis on the Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra traditions) in relation to their metaphysical conceptions of the self and ultimate reality. Advaita posits Brahman, an eternal, unchanging consciousness, as the sole ontological ground of existence, while Mahāyāna Buddhism asserts Śūnyatā, the emptiness of intrinsic existence, upheld through the principle of dependent origination. The research examines key points of divergence, including the Ātman–Anattā paradox, epistemological differences in accepted pramāṇas, and conflicting interpretations of consciousness as either a permanent witnessing self or a momentary cognitive event. By critically engaging primary texts such as Śaṅkara’s *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* and Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, the study investigates whether these traditions articulate complementary paths toward a shared ineffable truth or represent irreconcilable metaphysical worldviews. The analysis seeks to clarify the boundary between Brahman and Śūnyatā, evaluate the conceptual status of liberation in both systems, and determine whether non-duality and emptiness can be meaningfully reconciled. Ultimately, this work contributes to a nuanced understanding of Indian philosophical thought by mapping the foundational similarities and enduring differences between these two influential traditions.

Keywords: Yogācāra, brahman, śūnyatā (emptiness), ātman–anattā paradox, pramāṇa (epistemology).

I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of the self is arguably the axial concern of classical Indian philosophy. Advaita Vedānta and Mahāyāna Buddhism present two of the most sophisticated responses to this question, yet they do so through strikingly different conceptual frameworks. Advaita holds Brahman—pure, unchanging consciousness—as the sole ontological ground; the world of multiplicity is a superimposition upon this

non-dual reality. In contrast, Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly in the Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra traditions, asserts Śūnyatā (emptiness) and pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), denying any intrinsic essence (*svabhāva*) even to consciousness.

This paper develops a systematic comparison of these positions, organized around three knots of disagreement: (1) the Ātman–Anattā paradox, (2) epistemological divergence in accepted pramāṇas, and (3) conflicting models of consciousness permanent witness versus momentary stream. Through close reading of Śaṅkara’s *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* and Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), the study asks whether non-duality and emptiness can be reconciled or whether the traditions articulate irreducibly distinct metaphysics. A secondary aim is to clarify the soteriological horizon—how each system understands liberation and to assess whether practical convergence is possible despite metaphysical dissonance.

II. CONCEPTUAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. Advaita Vedānta: Brahman as the Only Reality
Advaita, crystallized by Śaṅkara, posits Brahman as *sat-cit-ānanda* (being-consciousness-bliss), the self-luminous, non-dual reality. Multiplicity is Māyā—not absolute nonexistence, but an ontological appearance lacking independent reality. The individual self (*jīva*) is Brahman misconstrued through avidyā (ignorance). Liberation (*mokṣa*) is the recognition (not production) of one’s identity with Brahman, classically summarized as *tat tvam asi*. Methodologically, Advaita relies on śruti (Upaniṣadic revelation) alongside perception and inference; śabda

is indispensable where empirical means cannot reach Brahman.

2. Mahāyāna Buddhism: Emptiness and Dependent Origination

Mādhyamaka, associated with Nāgārjuna, advances a radical critique of *svabhāva*: nothing has intrinsic nature; all phenomena arise dependently. Emptiness is not a hidden essence but the *lack* of essence; it is a therapeutic tool that de-reifies conceptual imputations. Yogācāra emphasizes the constructed and representational character of experience, sometimes using consciousness-only language (*viññaptimātra*), yet still denying an abiding self. For both schools, *nirvāṇa* is not a positive substance but the cessation of reification and clinging.

3. Framing the Problems

At stake is whether ultimate reality is a positive absolute (Brahman) or an apophatic disclosure of the absence of essence (*Śūnyatā*). Is Advaita's non-dualism tantamount to a reified metaphysical ground rejected by Buddhism, or can emptiness and non-duality be read as distinct methods converging on the same ineffable real?

III. THE ĀTMAN–ANATTĀ PARADOX

1. Vedāntic Affirmation of Ātman

Advaita argues that experience presupposes a constant witness (*sākṣin*) that remains unchanged through the flux of mental states. This witness is not an empirical ego but the very condition of the possibility of experience. The unity of consciousness, the continuity of memory, and the impossibility of objectifying the witness are invoked to ground Ātman as self-evident. On this view, to deny Ātman is performatively incoherent: denial itself presupposes the light of awareness in which denial occurs.

2. Buddhist Critique: Anattā as Method and Metaphysics

Buddhist sources deny any immutable core behind aggregates (*skandhas*). The continuity of personhood is a conventional construct supported by causal relations, not an underlying essence. The instinct to posit Ātman is seen as a grasping born of ignorance. Mādhyamaka insists that even emptiness is empty—a move designed to forestall its reification into a metaphysical ground.

3. Is There Middle Ground?

Ātman as the non-objectifiable light of awareness; Anattā as the emptiness of that very reification. Yet this rapprochement may blur robust differences: Advaita affirms an ultimate self-identical with Brahman, whereas Buddhism denies any ultimate self while retaining practical continuity at the conventional level. The paradox is thus not merely semantic but ontological.

IV. COMPETING ONTOLOGIES: BRAHMAN AND ŚŪNYATĀ

1. Brahman as Positive Absolute

For Advaita, Brahman is not a theoretical posit but the self-revealing ground of experience. The world is *mithyā*—neither absolutely real nor unreal; it has dependent, borrowed reality. Crucially, Brahman's non-duality implies that plurality is ultimately sublated in knowledge, not annihilated in fact; what is negated is the *misapprehension* of separateness.

2. Emptiness as the Lack of Essence

For Mādhyamaka, to seek a positive absolute misunderstands emptiness. The very notion of an independent substratum is precisely what the emptiness critique dissolves. If Brahman is posited as an unconditioned entity, it risks reifying a metaphysical ground—precisely the kind of view (*dr̥ṣṭi*) to be relinquished. Emptiness is therefore methodological and soteriological: it deconstructs views to end suffering.

3. Mapping Mithyā onto Śūnyatā?

At first glance, *mithyā* (dependent, neither real nor unreal) appears structurally akin to *Śūnyatā* (dependent, empty). Yet the direction of explanation differs. Advaita sublates dependence into a single unconditioned reality; Mādhyamaka leaves dependence without an underlying essence. The resemblance is functional but not metaphysical: one culminates in an affirmative monism, the other in a non-affirming negation.

V. CONSCIOUSNESS: WITNESS OR STREAM?

1. Advaita's Witness Consciousness (*Sākṣin*)

Advaita maintains that consciousness is self-revealing and not an object among objects. Mental states come and go; the witness does not. It is not temporally extended, not an entity in the world, and not a product

of causes. On this model, awareness is ontologically basic and identical with Brahman.

2. Buddhist Momentariness and Dependent Cognition

Buddhism explains cognition as a series of dependently originated moments without a metaphysically persistent subject. Continuity is constructed by memory and causal conditioning, not by an enduring witness. Yogācāra's sophisticated analyses of reflexive awareness (*svasaṃvedana*) aim to account for how experience is "self-presenting" without turning that self-presence into an abiding self.

VI.EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHOD (PRAMĀṆAS)

1. Vedānta: The Place of Śabda

Advaita accepts perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), and scriptural testimony (*śabda*) as valid means of knowledge. Since Brahman is not an object, it cannot be known by perception or ordinary inference; Upaniṣadic sentences serve as pointers that, when properly interpreted and assimilated, remove ignorance. Hermeneutic devices—*adhyāropa-apavāda* (superimposition and subsequent negation), *lakṣaṇā* (secondary signification), and *neti-neti*—are used to steer the mind beyond conceptual confines.

2. Buddhism: Perception and Inference Without Revelation

Buddhist epistemology, especially in the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti tradition, construes knowledge via perception and inference, resisting any independent, non-empirical *śabda* that authoritatively discloses ultimate truth. Language is conventional and useful, but not revelatory of an ultimate substance. Mādhyamaka adds that ultimate truth is the emptiness of all views—including the view that ultimate truth is linguistically stateable.

3. Consequences for Metaphysics

Because Vedānta admits *śabda* as disclosive of Brahman, it can coherently affirm an ultimate. Because Buddhism denies such revelatory authority to scripture, it tends to withhold metaphysical affirmation in favor of therapeutic deconstruction. Thus, epistemology underwrites metaphysics: one affirms, the other suspends.

VII.NIRVĀṆA AND MOKṢA

1. Vedānta's Liberation as Recognition

Liberation (*mokṣa*) is the immediate knowledge that one is Brahman. Practices such as discrimination (*viveka*), detachment (*vairāgya*), and meditative absorption support but do not produce Brahman; they prepare the intellect for recognition. The fruit is freedom from bondage by dissolving the doer-enjoyer complex and realizing the non-duality of self and reality.

2. Buddhism's Liberation as Cessation of Clinging

For Buddhism, liberation (*nirvāṇa*) is the cessation of dukkha through the cessation of craving and ignorance. It does not reveal a hidden substance; it dissolves a misconception. Insight into the emptiness of self and phenomena uproots attachment to views and identity, making compassion and non-clinging spontaneously possible.

VIII.OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

1. Buddhist Objection to Vedānta: Reification of a Ground

- *Objection:* Positing Brahman reinstates the essence that emptiness refutes.
- *Vedāntic Reply:* Brahman is not a "thing" with properties but the self-luminous condition of all knowing. Reification occurs only if Brahman is objectified; Advaita explicitly denies objectification.

2. Vedāntic Objection to Buddhism: Nihilism

- *Objection:* Denying an ultimate leads to nihilism.
- *Buddhist Reply:* Emptiness is not nothingness; it is the denial of *intrinsic* existence, not of conventional existence. Ethical cultivation and compassion presuppose the conventional truth of persons and suffering.

3. Mutual Challenge: Explaining Continuity

- *Vedānta to Buddhism:* Without a witness, how explain the unity of experience?
- *Buddhism to Vedānta:* Postulating a witness explains nothing; it halts inquiry by fiat. Causal continuity and reflexive awareness suffice to account for unity without an essence.

4. Pragmatic Reconciliation?

- Some propose that the traditions differ only linguistically: Advaita's "Brahman" and Buddhism's "emptiness" gesture toward the same ineffable.

- The present analysis finds this reconciliation limited: while both point beyond conceptual fixation, Advaita's positive monism and Buddhism's non-affirming negation remain theoretically distinct.

IX.METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This study employs textual hermeneutics and comparative analysis. Primary sources include Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* (with interpretive reliance on *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* where relevant) and Nāgārjuna's *MMK*. Secondary interlocutors include major expositions of Mādhyamaka and Advaita as well as modern scholarly treatments. The analysis foregrounds conceptual clarity and argument structure rather than sectarian commitments, and it aims to respect each tradition's self-understanding.

X.CONCLUSION

Advaita Vedānta and Mahāyāna Buddhism converge in their deep suspicion of naïve realism and in their shared commitment to liberative knowledge. Yet they diverge at the decisive metaphysical hinge. Advaita affirms a non-dual, self-luminous absolute Brahman wherein plurality is sublated. Mahāyāna affirms emptiness the radical denial of intrinsic essence wherein plurality is seen as dependently designated without an underlying ground.

These differences are not merely verbal; they configure epistemology, ontology, and liberation in distinct ways. Any reconciliation, therefore, is likeliest at the pragmatic and theological level (shared practices of de-reification, ethical cultivation, contemplative discipline), not at the level of metaphysical ontology. Far from being a stalemate, the tension between Brahman and Śūnyatā is a productive field of inquiry that continues to sharpen our understanding of consciousness, reality, and the possibility of liberation.

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