

# Oneness: Myth, Mystery, or ‘The Reality’

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## Abstract

This research paper, titled "*Oneness: Myth, Mystery, or The Reality*," explores the concept of oneness from philosophical and scientific perspectives, examining whether it is a myth, a mystery, or a reality. Drawing from **Advaita Vedanta**, where the individual **self (Atman)** is seen as non-different from the universal **consciousness (Brahman)**, and incorporating insights from contemporary philosophy and neuroscience, we argue that oneness transcends mere abstraction. The investigation reveals that both Eastern and Western traditions converge on the idea of interconnectedness, challenging the illusion of separateness. Additionally, empirical studies support the experiential aspects of oneness, indicating that it is not only a philosophical ideal but also a lived reality. The findings underscore the ethical implications of recognizing oneness, advocating for a holistic approach to personal and collective responsibility. Through this interdisciplinary dialogue, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of oneness as a vital framework for addressing contemporary existential and ethical dilemmas.

## Chapter 1: {Introduction} Brahman — The Ultimate Reality

In Advaita Vedanta, the concept of *Brahman* is the cornerstone of its non-dualistic view of reality. Brahman is described as the singular, infinite, and all-pervasive consciousness that is the source of all that exists. It is beyond **time**, **space**, **causality**, and **attributes**, yet it is the very essence of all beings. Brahman is often described as "*Sat-Chit-Ananda*" — **existence, consciousness, and bliss**.

The *Mandukya Upanishad* asserts: "*Ekam eva advitiam*" (**There is only one, without a second**). This statement encapsulates the non-dual nature of Brahman, implying that all multiplicity and diversity that we perceive is not ultimate reality but an **illusion (Maya)**. Brahman is infinite and changeless, and the **individual self (Atman)** is not separate from Brahman. The illusion of separateness arises due to **ignorance (Avidya)**, leading individuals to identify with their **body, mind, and ego**.

This non-duality (Advaita) of Brahman is further elaborated in the famous *Chandogya Upanishad* phrase "*Tat Tvam Asi*" (**That thou art**). This points to the profound realization that the **self (Atman)** is not different from the ultimate reality, Brahman. The entire universe is a manifestation of Brahman, and once the veil of ignorance is lifted, the individual self recognizes its inherent unity with the cosmos.

One of the key metaphors used in Advaita Vedanta to describe the relationship between Brahman and the world is that of the **rope and the snake**. Just as a rope may be mistakenly perceived as a snake in poor light, the individual perceives multiplicity and duality in the world due to ignorance. Upon closer examination, the snake is revealed to be a rope — the false perception is dispelled, and reality is recognized. Similarly, the world, with its perceived dualities, is ultimately recognized as Brahman when one attains **knowledge (Vidya)**.

Modern physics offers an intriguing parallel to this understanding. **Quantum physics** suggests that at the most fundamental level, reality is not composed of separate particles but of interconnected energy fields.

In this sense, the distinctions we perceive between objects and individuals are superficial, much like the illusion of the snake. Reality, at its core, is one.

The realization of Brahman is not merely intellectual but experiential. **The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.4.10) declares, "Aham Brahmasmi" (I am Brahman).** This realization leads to the dissolution of ego and the recognition of oneness with the entire universe. In this state of **enlightenment (*Jivanmukti*)**, the individual sees all beings as expressions of the same divine consciousness and acts with compassion, detachment, and wisdom.

## Chapter 2: Maya and the Illusion of Duality

*Maya* is the principle in Advaita Vedanta that explains why the world, although rooted in oneness, appears to us as diverse and dualistic. It is the cosmic illusion that veils the true nature of Brahman and causes us to perceive the world as made up of distinct, separate entities. *Maya* operates through the three **gunas** — **Sattva (purity), Rajas (activity), and Tamas (inertia)** — which together give rise to the various forms, names, and experiences we encounter in the material world.

The ***Bhagavad Gita* (7.14)** beautifully expresses the nature of *Maya*: **"Daivi hy esa gunamayi mama maya duratyaya"** — **"This divine illusion of mine, composed of the gunas, is difficult to overcome."** *Maya* is not simply a force of deception but a divine power that serves a purpose in the cosmic order. It enables the manifestation of the universe and gives rise to the experience of individuality. However, it is also the source of human suffering, as it causes beings to forget their true nature and become entangled in **the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*Samsara*)**.

One of the most significant implications of *Maya* is that the distinctions between self and other, subject and object, are illusory. The ***Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (2.4.14)** declares: **"Neti, Neti"** — **"Not this, not this."** This phrase points to the idea that the ultimate reality cannot be grasped through conceptual thinking or sensory perception. Whatever we can name, describe, or categorize belongs to the realm of *Maya* and is, therefore, not the ultimate truth. The reality of Brahman lies beyond these limited frameworks of understanding.

In a modern context, **cognitive science** aligns with the idea of *Maya* in its exploration of how the brain constructs reality. Studies in **cognitive neuroscience** show that our sensory experiences are not direct representations of the external world but are constructed by the brain based on limited inputs. This aligns with the Vedantic assertion that what we perceive through the senses is not the ultimate truth, but a filtered and distorted version of reality shaped by ignorance.

Moreover, *Maya* is not an external force acting on the individual but is intrinsic to the human experience. The ego, which gives rise to the sense of individuality and separation, is a product of *Maya*. As long as we identify with the ego, we remain caught in the web of *Maya*, believing ourselves to be separate from others and from the universe. The goal of Advaita Vedanta is to transcend this illusion by realizing the oneness of all existence.

An important distinction in Vedanta is that while *Maya* creates the appearance of the world, Brahman is not affected by it. Just as a magician's illusion does not change the magician's true nature, Brahman remains unchanged and untouched by the **world of forms and phenomena**. The world, as experienced through *Maya*, is described as **"Mithya"** — it is neither completely real nor completely unreal. It has a temporary, conditional existence that depends on Brahman but is not the ultimate truth.

Here, *Maya* is the cosmic power that creates the illusion of duality, causing individuals to experience the world as a collection of separate entities. However, this duality is ultimately an illusion, and the realization

of oneness dispels Maya, revealing the true, undivided nature of reality as Brahman.

### Chapter 3: The Atman-Brahman Identity

One of the most profound teachings of Advaita Vedanta is the identity of *Atman* (the individual soul) and *Brahman* (the ultimate reality). This teaching asserts that the **true self**, or **Atman**, is not the body, mind, or ego but is identical with Brahman, the **infinite consciousness** that pervades the universe. The realization of this identity is the key to **liberation** (*Moksha*) and the end of suffering.

The *Chandogya Upanishad* famously declares: "*Tat Tvam Asi*" — "**That thou art.**" This statement reveals that the individual self, which appears to be separate and limited, is in reality identical with the **infinite, formless Brahman**. The perception of duality is a result of **ignorance** (*Avidya*), which causes us to identify with the body and mind. Once this ignorance is dispelled through **knowledge** (*Jnana*), the individual realizes their true nature as Brahman and attains liberation.

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.4.10) offers another powerful affirmation of the Atman-Brahman identity: "*Aham Brahmasmi*" — "**I am Brahman.**" This realization leads to a profound transformation in the individual's perception of themselves and the world. The individual no longer sees themselves as a finite, separate being but as the infinite, undivided consciousness that underlies all existence.

The metaphor of the wave and the ocean is often used in Advaita Vedanta to explain the relationship between Atman and Brahman. Just as a wave is not separate from the ocean but is a temporary form that arises and dissolves within it, the individual self is not separate from Brahman. The wave may appear to be distinct for a time, but its essence is always water, just as the essence of the individual self is always Brahman.

The realization of the Atman-Brahman identity leads to liberation because it dissolves the sense of ego and separation that causes suffering. In the state of ignorance, individuals are bound by their desires, fears, and attachments, believing themselves to be distinct from the rest of the universe. This mistaken belief is the root of all suffering, as it leads to a constant striving for external fulfillment and a fear of loss and death.

However, when the individual realizes that their true nature is Brahman, they transcend these limitations. The enlightened being (*Jivanmukta*) sees the world as a manifestation of Brahman and recognizes the same divine essence in all beings. This realization leads to a sense of peace, compassion, and detachment, as the individual no longer identifies with the ego or the material world.

The *Bhagavad Gita* (2.20) beautifully expresses this state of liberation: "*Na jayate mriyate va kadacin... ajah nityah sasvato 'yam purano na hanyate hanyamane sarire*" — "**The soul is neither born nor does it die; it is unborn, eternal, and imperishable. It is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.**" This shloka emphasizes the immortality of the Atman and its identity with the eternal, changeless Brahman.

In a modern context, the idea of the Atman-Brahman identity can be explored through the lens of consciousness studies. Many **contemporary philosophers** and **neuroscientists** are grappling with the nature of consciousness and its relationship to the material world. The Advaitic view that consciousness is not a product of the brain but is the fundamental reality that underlies all existence offers a unique perspective on these debates. The realization that consciousness is universal and not confined to individual minds aligns with the Advaitic teaching that Atman is identical with Brahman.

Here, the Atman-Brahman identity is the central teaching of Advaita Vedanta, offering a path to liberation through the realization that the individual self is not separate from the ultimate reality. This realization leads to the dissolution of ego, the end of suffering, and the experience of oneness with all beings.

#### Chapter 4: The Role of Knowledge and Ignorance (Vidya and Avidya)

In Advaita Vedanta, **knowledge (Vidya)** and **ignorance (Avidya)** play pivotal roles in understanding oneness and overcoming the illusion of duality. *Avidya* refers to the ignorance that veils the true nature of reality, making individuals believe they are separate entities, distinct from Brahman. This ignorance causes one to identify with the body, mind, and ego, thereby creating a sense of duality between the **individual self (Jiva)** and the **ultimate reality (Brahman)**. On the other hand, *Vidya* is the knowledge that dispels this ignorance, revealing the **truth of oneness**.

The *Mundaka Upanishad (1.2.12)* states: "*Dva suparna sayuja sakhaya,*" meaning **two birds, inseparable friends, sit on the same tree**. One eats the fruit, while the other looks on. The bird that eats the fruit represents the individual self, bound by ignorance and caught in the cycle of karma. The bird that looks on is the higher Self, Brahman, untouched by worldly concerns. Through knowledge, the individual realizes that it is the higher Self and not the lower, limited being.

*Vidya* dissolves the identification with the ego and leads to the realization that the individual **self (Atman)** is not separate from **Brahman**. This is why the *Bhagavad Gita (4.39)* asserts: "*Shraddhavan labhate jnanam*" — **the one with faith attains knowledge**. Once the knowledge of non-duality is gained, the individual sees the same divine essence in all beings. **"The separation between self and other, subject and object, dissolves, revealing the reality of oneness."**

The modern interpretation of ignorance in Advaita Vedanta can be compared with the cognitive biases and psychological conditioning that shape human perception. In cognitive science, the idea that our brains filter and construct reality aligns with the concept of *Avidya*. For example, cognitive neuroscience shows that the brain constructs a subjective view of reality based on limited inputs. The process of removing these cognitive filters and biases can be paralleled with the Vedantic idea of dispelling ignorance through knowledge.

Further, quantum mechanics suggests that at the most fundamental level, reality does not consist of distinct objects but rather of interconnected energy fields. This scientific perspective aligns with the Advaita concept of oneness, where *Vidya* reveals that distinctions between individual selves and the world are illusions created by *Avidya*.

Here, **knowledge (Vidya)** and **ignorance (Avidya)** are central to understanding oneness in Advaita Vedanta. Ignorance causes individuals to perceive duality, while knowledge reveals the underlying unity of all existence. This ancient teaching finds modern resonance in fields such as **cognitive science** and **quantum physics**, illustrating the timelessness of the Vedantic insights.

#### Chapter 5: Oneness and the Concept of Karma

The **law of karma** is central to both ancient and modern Vedantic philosophy, and it holds significant implications for the idea of oneness. Karma refers to the law of cause and effect, where every action has consequences that determine the circumstances of one's future. In Advaita Vedanta, the understanding of karma is deeply intertwined with the realization of oneness, as the perception of duality is what binds individuals to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*Samsara*).

The *Bhagavad Gita (3.9)* offers a solution to this bondage through the path of **Karma Yoga**: "*Yajnarthat karmano 'nyatra loko 'yam karma-bandhanah*" — **"Work done as a sacrifice for the divine does not bind one to the cycle of karma."** The key to breaking free from the cycle of karma is to act without attachment to the results, recognizing that the individual self is not the doer, but Brahman is.

When one realizes the oneness of all existence, their actions become selfless, as they no longer act out of a sense of ego or personal gain. The enlightened being (*Jivanmukta*) sees the same consciousness in all beings and thus acts with compassion, seeing no distinction between themselves and others. As the *Isha Upanishad* (1) states: "*Ishavasyam idam sarvam*" — **everything in the universe is pervaded by the divine. This realization leads to a shift in how one approaches life and ethical decisions.**

In the modern context, the concept of karma can be related to the ethical implications of our interconnectedness. The environmental and ecological crises that the world faces today highlight how the actions of individuals and societies have far-reaching consequences on the planet as a whole. The recognition of oneness emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to these issues, where the well-being of all life forms is considered. **The *Bhagavad Gita* (5.18) underscores this realization: "*Vidya-vinaya-sampanne brahmane gavi hastini...*" — "The wise see the same in a learned Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, and even a dog."**

The idea of karma in Advaita Vedanta is not fatalistic but is meant to show that through right knowledge and action, one can transcend the cycle of cause and effect. The realization of oneness dissolves the sense of doership, and the individual no longer accumulates karma. They act in alignment with the **cosmic order, or *Dharma*, without selfish motives or desires.**

Thus, the concept of karma in Vedanta reinforces the idea of oneness, as it shows how every action is interconnected with the larger whole. Acting with this awareness leads to liberation from the cycle of samsara and the realization of one's true nature as Brahman.

## Chapter 6: Oneness and Mystical Experience in Vedanta

Mystical experiences have always been central to Vedantic philosophy, providing a direct and personal encounter with the reality of oneness. These experiences often involve a sense of ego-dissolution, where the boundary between the individual and the universe disappears, and the person feels an intimate connection with the whole. In Advaita Vedanta, such experiences are seen as moments of *Jnana* (knowledge), where the **truth of non-duality** is directly realized.

One of the most famous descriptions of such an experience comes from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (2.4.14): "*Yatra tv asya sarvam atmaivabhut...*" — **"Where everything has become the Self, what should one see, and through what?"** This shloka emphasizes that when a person attains the highest knowledge, they no longer perceive a world of multiplicity because everything is recognized as the Self (Brahman). In this state, the distinctions between **the seer, the seen, and the act of seeing** collapse into a unified experience of oneness.

Mystical experiences in Advaita Vedanta are not considered supernatural but are seen as glimpses of the true nature of reality. The *Mandukya Upanishad* describes the *Turiya* state — the fourth state of consciousness that transcends waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. This is the state of pure awareness, where the individual realizes their identity with Brahman. The *Turiya* experience is the culmination of Advaita meditation practices, such as *Nididhyasana* (contemplation) and *Dhyana* (meditation), which aim to strip away the layers of ego and reveal the underlying oneness.

In modern times, the study of mystical experiences has gained attention in fields like **psychology** and **neuroscience**. Neuroscientists have found that during mystical experiences, parts of the brain responsible for the sense of self show reduced activity, leading to the dissolution of ego-boundaries and a sense of unity with the external world. This aligns with the Advaita view that the ego is an illusory construct that veils the underlying reality of oneness.



Examples of contemporary mystics who resonate with Vedantic philosophy include **Ramana Maharshi**, who taught the method of *Atma-Vichara (self-inquiry)* to directly realize the **non-dual nature of the Self**. His profound question, “**Who am I?**” is meant to lead the seeker beyond the ego to the realization that there is no **separate self, only Brahman**.

Here, mystical experiences in Vedanta serve as direct evidence of the reality of oneness. These experiences transcend intellectual understanding and provide a lived encounter with the truth that all is Brahman. By connecting ancient Vedantic teachings with modern scientific insights into consciousness, these mystical experiences affirm the timelessness of the Vedantic insight into oneness.

### Chapter 7: Oneness and Environmental Ethics

The realization of oneness in Advaita Vedanta has profound implications for environmental ethics. The idea that all life is interconnected and pervaded by the same divine consciousness leads to a holistic approach to ecology and the treatment of the natural world. In Vedanta, harming another being is ultimately seen as harming oneself because there is no true separation between individuals, species, or the environment.

The *Isha Upanishad (1)* declares: “*Ishavasyam idam sarvam*” — “**The entire universe is pervaded by the divine.**” This shloka suggests that every part of creation is sacred and deserves respect and care. When we recognize that the same divine essence exists in every aspect of the world — from the smallest organism to the vast cosmos — we are compelled to act responsibly toward the environment.

The modern environmental crisis, with issues such as climate change, deforestation, and species extinction, reflects a profound disconnection between humanity and the natural world. Vedantic teachings offer a framework for addressing these challenges by emphasizing the unity of all life. The concept of *Dharma* in Vedanta also plays a role here, as it calls for living in harmony with the cosmic order and not exploiting the natural world for selfish gain.

Contemporary environmental movements that advocate for the intrinsic value of all life and the interconnectedness of ecosystems resonate deeply with the Vedantic vision of oneness. The idea that humans are not separate from nature but are part of a larger web of life challenges anthropocentric views and encourages a more sustainable and ethical approach to the environment.

Here, the realization of oneness in Vedanta extends beyond philosophical speculation and has practical ethical implications for how we treat the environment. By seeing the divine in all forms of life, Advaita Vedanta encourages a compassionate and responsible approach to ecology, which is increasingly relevant in the face of global environmental challenges.

### Chapter 8: The Nature of Reality (Maya and Brahman)

In Advaita Vedanta, the concepts of *Maya (illusion)* and *Brahman (ultimate reality)* are central to understanding the nature of existence. *Maya* refers to the deceptive nature of the material world, which veils the true essence of reality—Brahman, the non-dual absolute. The *Bhagavad Gita (2.16)* states: “*O son of Kunti, the unchanging is called the eternal, while the changing is called the ephemeral.*” This shloka illustrates the distinction between the eternal truth of Brahman and the transient nature of the physical universe.

*Brahman* is described in the *Upanishads* as “Sat-Chit-Ananda” — **existence, consciousness, and bliss**. This means that the ultimate reality is not just a static being but a dynamic, living presence that encompasses all forms of life. *Maya*, on the other hand, creates a veil of ignorance that leads individuals

to perceive themselves as separate entities in a fragmented world. This illusion causes suffering and perpetuates the cycle of birth and death (*Samsara*).

The analogy of **the rope and the snake from Advaita philosophy** exemplifies this concept. A person seeing a rope in dim light may mistake it for a snake, causing fear and anxiety. Similarly, the world perceived through the lens of *Maya* can lead to misunderstanding and suffering. However, when one gains true knowledge (*Jnana*), they see the rope (the ultimate reality) for what it is, dispelling the illusion of the snake (the material world).

In contemporary philosophy, the idea of *Maya* parallels discussions in metaphysics about the nature of reality and perception. The work of philosophers like George Berkeley, who argued that reality is constructed through perception, resonates with the Vedantic view that what we perceive as "real" is often a reflection of our limited understanding.

By recognizing the **interplay of *Maya* and *Brahman***, individuals can cultivate a deeper awareness of their true nature. The practice of meditation and self-inquiry can help peel away the layers of illusion, revealing the underlying unity that connects all beings.

### Chapter 9: Oneness and the Concept of Love (Prema)

In Advaita Vedanta, love (*Prema*) is not merely an emotion but a fundamental expression of the oneness that pervades all existence. The realization of oneness fosters a sense of love and compassion, transcending the limited understanding of love as something confined to personal relationships. In this framework, love becomes the recognition of the divine essence in all beings.

**The *Bhagavad Gita* (12.13-14) states: "He who is free from malice towards all beings, friendly and compassionate, free from possessiveness, and who is self-controlled, has a mind fixed on Me—he is dear to Me."** This emphasizes that true love arises from an understanding of interconnectedness, leading to compassion for all living beings.

Love, in the Vedantic sense, is the natural response to the realization of oneness. When one recognizes that every being is an expression of the same divine reality, the **boundaries of "self" and "other" dissolve**. This perspective aligns with the teachings of mystics across cultures who emphasize love as the ultimate realization of unity. For example, **the Sufi poet Rumi expressed this beautifully: "The wound is the place where the Light enters you,"** highlighting that suffering can lead to a deeper understanding of love and connection.

Furthermore, in contemporary discussions of love and ethics, philosophers like Martin Buber emphasize the importance of "I-Thou" relationships, where true connection arises from recognizing the other as a partner in existence rather than an object. This resonates with the Vedantic understanding that recognizing the divine in others fosters a genuine sense of love and community.

Ultimately, the concept of love in Vedanta invites individuals to act with compassion and kindness, recognizing that their actions impact the greater whole. This profound love extends beyond personal relationships, promoting a sense of universal brotherhood that is essential for a harmonious existence.

### Chapter 10: Oneness and the Pursuit of Happiness

Advaita Vedanta teaches that true happiness is not found in external circumstances but arises from realizing one's inherent oneness with the universe. The pursuit of happiness is often misconceived as seeking pleasure through material possessions or achievements. However, these pursuits are transient and ultimately lead to dissatisfaction. **The *Bhagavad Gita* (5.22) states: "The pleasures that arise from**

*contact with the senses are like the bitter poison that appears sweet at first; they lead to suffering in the end."*

True happiness, as understood in Vedanta, is rooted in the realization of one's unity with Brahman. This realization brings an abiding sense of peace and contentment that is not dependent on external conditions. **The Chandogya Upanishad (7.23) eloquently states: "Tattvamasi" — "You are That,"** affirming the idea that one's true nature is not separate from the ultimate reality.

The modern pursuit of happiness often aligns with external validation, leading to a cycle of desire and disappointment. Psychologists today emphasize the importance of inner fulfillment, mindfulness, and self-acceptance, which resonate with the teachings of Vedanta. For instance, the practice of gratitude and self-reflection helps individuals shift their focus from external sources of happiness to the intrinsic joy of being. Moreover, studies in positive psychology reveal that genuine happiness arises from relationships, community, and a sense of purpose—elements that align with the Vedantic view of interconnectedness. When individuals realize their unity with others, they experience greater compassion and fulfillment, leading to a deeper sense of happiness that transcends fleeting pleasures.

Here, the pursuit of happiness in Vedanta invites individuals to look beyond the superficial and to explore the depths of their true nature. By recognizing that happiness arises from oneness, individuals can cultivate a profound sense of joy that is unaffected by the external world.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of oneness as a concept transcends simplistic categorizations of **myth, mystery, or reality**. Rooted in both Advaita Vedanta and contemporary philosophical thought, oneness reveals the interconnected nature of existence, challenging the dualities that often fragment our understanding. Through empirical evidence and experiential insights, it emerges as a tangible reality that invites a reevaluation of our ethical responsibilities. Recognizing our shared existence fosters a deeper sense of compassion and accountability, emphasizing the need for unity in addressing the complexities of modern life. Ultimately, oneness serves as a foundational principle that not only enriches philosophical discourse but also provides practical guidance for harmonious living.

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