

## *The practice of reflective questioning* *– an advaita approach*

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### **Debate and enquiry**

In the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, debate and enquiry have two quite different functions. Debate is primarily concerned with theory, and enquiry is the actual practice of an advaita student.

Debate is what scholars or pandits do, as they construct and establish the differing world views of different schools of thought. This is a theoretical activity, in which each school sets out its own system of thought, in competition with other schools. Here, each school attacks the views of other schools, in order to establish a systematic view of world that represents the school to those who see it from outside.

But this construction of world views is not the essence of philosophy. It cannot be more than a theoretical preliminary to the actual practice of philosophy, which is a reflective enquiry into direct experience. As each school describes the world, it is only setting out a view that is conducive to its particular kind of enquiry.

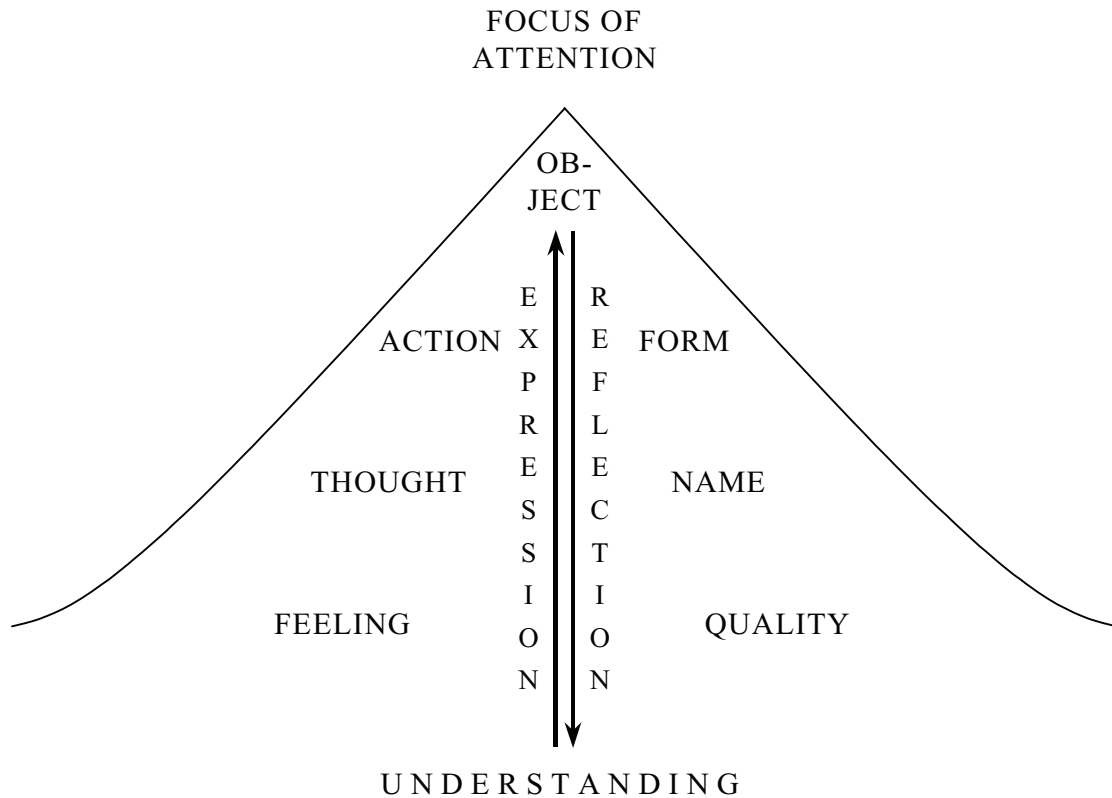
The actual practice of enquiry starts when one is skeptical of one's own views, thus opening one's own beliefs to question and correction. That's what an advaita student is shown how to do. And it is meant to be most definitely practical.

When one attacks the views and the beliefs of others, then that is just a theoretical debate with no essential effect upon one's own understanding. But when one's questioning turns round reflectively upon one's own mistaken assumptions, then one's own understanding is at stake. And if such questioning is genuine, then it amounts to an investigating experiment, in which one looks to see what clearer understanding it may lead towards.

The results of such a questioning are then inherently practical, for the new understanding gets inherently expressed in further feelings, thoughts, actions and perceptions that arise from it. It's through such questioning that we get educated, as we learn in practice, from the process of continuing experience. For as this process actually takes place, it sometimes contradicts what we believe and thus leads on to questioning and clearer knowledge.

### **Learning from experience**

In the process of experience, as we learn about the world, there is a cycle of expression and reflection, which is illustrated in the accompanying diagram (next page). The diagram shows a particular moment of experience, with some object appearing at the limited focus of mental attention.




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C O N S C I O U S N E S S

As attention turns to the object, it appears, as a pictured something in the world; while the world as a whole is understood at the background of experience, in the depth of underlying consciousness. From that consciousness, our understanding is expressed in what we feel and think and do. Thus our attention turns to objects that we see. This arising of expression is represented on the left side of the diagram, by the upward arrow rising up through feeling, thought and action.

Next, as an object is perceived, there is a reflection back, represented by the downward arrow on the right. Through the object's form and name and quality, its perception is taken back into the depth of mind. There, each perception is assimilated into understanding.

By thus assimilating our perceptions, we learn from experience. As each perception is absorbed, it brings about a further state of understanding, at the ground of consciousness. From there, the cycle of expression and reflection keeps repeating, turning attention to further objects and absorbing their perception back again. As this cycle keeps repeating, we build our pictures of the world: by fitting new perceptions into them, or by questioning and changing the pictures if the perceptions don't fit.

**Non-dual consciousness**

As we look out through our senses and our minds, into a world that's sensually and mentally pictured, objects and activities are seen as pictured elements, which function in this pictured world. But, in everyone's experience, all of this picturing depends

upon a consciousness that knows and illuminates it. That consciousness is expressed in the picturing, but it can't be known directly as a pictured element, as any pictured object or activity or function or relationship or quality. For, in its essence, consciousness is that which knows. To know it directly, there must be a reflection back from all sensual and conceptual pictures, to that which knows them from within.

In the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, such a reflection is attempted by questioning our habitual assumption that consciousness is a personal activity of body or mind. When any such activity is identified as consciousness, the identification is questioned by distinguishing consciousness as that which knows the activity. As such, consciousness is not to be confused with the activity itself, which is a known object of some physical or mental picturing. There is thus a reflective investigation, into an objectless and actionless consciousness, quite distinct from anything that's known by perception or conception in the physical and mental world.

But this investigation is reported to have a paradoxical conclusion. At the very end of the investigation, when that which knows is completely distinguished from what is known, so that there is no more confusion between the two, it *then* turns out that they are finally identical. For, by returning to the purely subjective ground of consciousness, it turns out that this ground extends through all experience, quite unlike our partial faculties of body and of mind.

Our physical and mental faculties are partial and thus personal. They act personally, producing partial pictures of physical or mental objects. This picturing of objects differs from person to person, producing different appearances for different persons, with different bodies and minds. But, when consciousness is distinguished from all physical and mental faculties, there is no way of differentiating it in different people. It is at once subjective and impersonal. In everyone's experience, it is always present, underneath. It is there a purely knowing ground, beneath all physical and mental appearances that anyone perceives.

So everything that is experienced, throughout the entire world, expresses that pure knowing ground. It is the complete reality of all that's known, expressed in everything that may appear, to anyone. It is at once what truly knows and what is truly known, beneath all differing appearances. This does not mean that there is no reality in objects. Nor that the reality of objects is merely mental and personal. The meaning is, instead, that as each object appears, it expresses a pure consciousness, which is the impersonal reality of all the world.

Whatever may appear, to anyone, at any place or time, is an expression of that un-mixed consciousness. That is a self-illuminating reality, whose very being is to know. It illuminates appearances by its mere presence, as it continues through the physical and mental appearances that come and go, in everyone's experience. And these appearances arise from it, as its changing and differing expressions. The appearances that express it are known indirectly, by physical and mental actions of body and mind. But it can only be known directly, by coming back to it – at the impersonal ground of one's own experience, where knowing and being are identical.

A complete distinction, between knower and known, is thus reported to arrive at a pure unity, where all distinctions are dissolved. That paradox is why this philosophy is called 'advaita', which means 'non-dual'. An eventual non-duality is approached through a careful and complete investigation of the duality between what knows and what is known.

In this investigation, reason is not used objectively, to build up pictures that can calculate results in an objective world. But nor is reasoned questioning abandoned, in favour of religious faith or mystic practices that cultivate expanded powers of mind. Instead, the use of reason is turned back subjectively, upon its own assumptions. The use of reason here is not to calculate objective ends, but rather to investigate assumptions and to clarify misunderstanding. The aim is thus in essence educational, to discern what's true from what is false and hence to know more truly.

According to Advaita philosophy, there is no proper call for stopping reason short, from making its discernments of truth and falsity. Quite to the contrary, it's only when such reasoning is taken to its final end that consciousness is rightly known. And then discernment disappears, of its own accord. For no distinctions there remain.