

What is Neo-Advaita?

Mystics have proclaimed the oneness of all things for thousands of years. The science of self inquiry that culminated in the teachings of Adi Shankara in the eighth century has had a profound effect on Eastern religion and spirituality. Although we see the idea of non-duality popping up in Western thought from the time of Christ until the present day, it did not develop into a systematic means of self realization and has virtually no impact on Christianity, Islam and Judaism, unlike self inquiry, which deeply conditioned Indian culture. Until the colonial era, contact between the East and West was limited, but slowly the West became aware of the social, political and religious philosophies of the once powerful Oriental nations. During the last half of the nineteenth century, the New Thought movement sprang up in America. The founders of Christian Science, Unity, and Science of Mind and the transcendental poets were certainly familiar with non-dual thought. Around the turn of the last century, a few Indian mahatmas visited the West and more or less formally introduced us to the idea of non-duality. The powerful speech given by Swami Vivekananda at the Congress of World Religions in Chicago in 1893 was a milestone in the East-West spiritual relationship, proclaiming as it did the oneness of all religions.

For some reason, Vivekananda put his own spin on the traditional teachings, emphasizing Yoga at the expense of Vedanta. It is possible that he felt that the West was not properly prepared. Whatever the reason, the Vedanta he introduced to the West was not strictly traditional and became known as New Vedanta or Modern Vedanta, a contradiction in terms, if ever there was one.

Multi-Path Confusion

New Vedanta introduced the idea of four paths or yogas—action, devotion, knowledge and meditation—which were supposedly suitable for different personality types, whereas the Vedas only sanction two: action and knowledge. The path of karma is intended for extroverts with a heavy vasana load, and the path of knowledge is for contemplative types whose vasanas are predominately sattvic. How the multi-path idea was meant to be an improvement is difficult to

discern. Traditionally Yoga is considered to be a subset of the science of self knowledge, not a separate path to enlightenment. The practices of Yoga are not inferior to self inquiry but, as laboriously pointed out so far, are not suitable as a means of liberation. They are, however, extremely valuable to prepare the mind for liberation because without a pure mind, liberation is not possible.

So with the ascendancy of the Yoga teachings, enlightenment came to be considered a permanent experience of samadhi, in contrast with the mundane experiences of everyday life, which it obviously cannot be if reality is non-dual. In any case, the experiential notion of enlightenment has been the dominant view for the last one hundred years in the West, although it dates back to a few centuries BC, where it is given voice in the Yoga scriptures of Patanjali. It has obviously been around for a very long time because we can trace the Yoga Sutra's origins to the Upanishads, which are records of mankind's earliest spiritual thinking.

Air travel increased the East-West dialogue. By and large, the tsunami of export gurus that inundated the West in the 1960s peddled Modern Vedanta. The emphasis on Yoga was necessary because materialism had corrupted the Western mind. Although there was a strong spiritual hunger in the West, it was not really prepared to assimilate the essence of self inquiry. Materialists are doers and enjoyers and the idea of experiencing enlightenment is good enough for them. As the world became increasingly interconnected and spirituality gained respectability, the bond between East and West deepened.

Ramana Maharshi, Osho, Papaji and the Rise of Neo-Advaita

In the eighties, the Western spiritual world became reacquainted with Ramana Maharshi, a great Indian sage, who had achieved a certain degree of international recognition around the middle of the last century, but who had been all but forgotten since his death. Ramana realized the non-dual nature of the self and taught self inquiry and Yoga. Neo-Advaita, sometimes called Pseudo-Advaita, the West's latest idea of the wisdom of the East, came about mainly through a disciple of Ramana, HWL Poonjaji, commonly known as Papaji,

although J. Krishnamurti, Jean Klein, Ramesh Balsekar and others contributed to it.

Papaji, who was virtually unknown in India during his life, came to the attention of the Western spiritual world shortly after Bhagawan Shree Rajneesh, the notorious ninety-three-Rolls-Royce guru died. Rajneesh, the horse's mouth concerning the topic of enlightenment for Westerners for many years, was a particularly clever man who created a very large following by wedding two largely incompatible concepts, sense enjoyment and enlightenment. His "Zorba the Buddha" idea gave a whole generation of rebellious, disaffected, community-seeking Westerners good reason to party hearty on their way to God. When Rajneesh, who rechristened himself Osho to avoid the bad karma his notoriety produced, died, his devotees, ever on the lookout for the next master, "discovered" Papaji, by this time an old man languishing in Lucknow, a hot, dirty, noisy city on the banks of the Gomati river, a tributary of the Ganges.

Papaji, like Osho, was a clever man with an outsized personality. He was a shaktipat guru with a super abundance of "spiritual" energy, which some people claim he transmitted to his disciples. A shaktipat guru transmits shakti, spiritual energy, which causes an epiphany. After the transmission, Papaji informed them that they were enlightened. He should have known better—and perhaps he did—because there is only one self and it has always been enlightened. But this distinction was definitely lost on his followers. As it so happened, many got high on "the energy" and imagined themselves to be enlightened, a condition known in yogic culture as manolaya, a temporary cessation of thought, or if you prefer an English term, an epiphany.

It so happens that Osho's followers, in spite of the fact that most of them spent long periods in India, had virtually no knowledge of self inquiry, even though they called themselves "neo-sannyasins" which translates as "new re-nunciates." Renunciation is a tried and true Vedic spiritual idea, but in their case it is not clear what they actually renounced. Buddha was certainly a renunciate, but it would be a stretch to expect Zorba to renounce anything that interfered with his enthusiastic celebration of life.

On the upside, his followers busied themselves developing sometimes effective therapies to deal with their manifold neuroses. Osho was a Jain, not a Hindu, and seems to have more or less ignored the great spiritual tradition that surrounded him, at least after he became famous. His role models, whom he was not above criticizing, were Christ and the Buddha. Papaji, on the other hand, was a died-in-the-wool Hindu from a Brahmin family of Krishna devotees. His contribution to the spiritual education of this group was two-fold. He introduced them to Ramana Maharshi, whom he claimed was his guru, thus giving himself a golden, nay platinum, credential. And he familiarized them with the word advaita, which means non-duality. Hence, the advaita movement, which has attracted many thousands of Westerners. Although Ramana was Papaji's guru, their ideas of spiritual practice, self inquiry, were quite different. Ramana's involved persistent and intense effort on a moment to moment basis to dispel the mind/ego's idea of duality, while Papaji's involved only asking the question "Who am I?" and "keeping quiet" until the answer appeared, the absurdity of which was lost on them.

Neo-Advaita Versus Traditional Vedanta

On the surface Neo-Advaita, which has no worthwhile methodology, seems fairly reasonable. By and large it teaches that you are not the body-mind-ego entity and that you are non-dual awareness, both of which are in harmony with tradition. If reality is non-dual, then there is no one that is ignorant of his or herself because knowledge and ignorance are duality. If there is no ignorance of who we are, there is no need for a teaching, a teacher or a student. In non-dual reality there is no body and mind to be something other than the self—awareness—so there is no bondage and no liberation, no suffering and enjoying, no joy and no sorrow. If you are non-dual awareness you cannot do anything, so there are no right and wrong actions. You were never born and you never die and experience does not exist.

This teaching causes a problem because it does not take experience into account. So you either have to deny the existence of experience, which can only take place in duality, or modify the teaching. You cannot deny the existence

of experience—although Neo-Advaita does its level best—because it exists. So to tell someone caught in the experiential world that he or she does not exist, or that nothing can be done to attain enlightenment, is not helpful. The sages who gave us self inquiry were considerably more sophisticated and worked out an intelligent solution. They assigned a provisional reality to duality that is in harmony with the experience of everyone and then proceeded to destroy it, using teachings that correspond with the common sense logic of the seeker's own experience.

Without the notion of a provisional or apparent reality, which experience confirms, you are forced to superimpose the idea that all is consciousness on empirical reality. Needless to say, it does not apply to this level of reality. A verse in the scriptures on Yoga says, "a yogi in samadhi sees no difference between a lump of gold and the excreta of a crow." Presumably, an enlightened Neo-Advaitin, in dire financial straits, might attempt to pawn a handful of crow poop and sweep his lump of gold into the garbage can. Non-duality, non-difference, does not mean sameness. It means that from the self's perspective there is no difference, but from the level of the body and mind there are only differences. This discrimination between what is real and what is apparent is the signature of an enlightened person. In fact, one of the definitions of enlightenment found in the scriptures of self inquiry is "the discrimination between what is real and what is apparent." When you superimpose the notion of non-duality on multiplicity, you add a belief that will eventually have to be discarded at some point. This kind of spiritual belief, which is just ignorance, is exceedingly hard to investigate if it is taken to be the truth.

No Teacher, Seeker, Path, Knowledge or Ignorance

If reality is non-dual and a special experience of consciousness or a dead mind is not enlightenment, only self knowledge could be enlightenment. But Neo-Advaita does not accept the view that ignorance, which shows up as a lack of discrimination, is the problem, because it says that ignorance does not exist. This is a convenient teaching that plays to the strong anti-intellectual bias of modern seekers. It is true that it does not exist from the self's point of view, but

a seeker does not know that he or she is the self or he or she would not be seeking, so this teaching is not a teaching at all. It leaves the seeker with no avenue to actualize the desire for freedom that attracts him or her to the idea of enlightenment, and is tailor made to produce frustration. That enlightenment is a blank mind or the absence of ego is an equally ill-considered notion that inevitably produces suffering when it is pursued. Both of these ideas are the result of level confusion, assigning the same degree of reality to pure consciousness and reflected consciousness—the experiential world.

Of course, if there is no knowledge and no ignorance, there is no seeker either. And if there is no seeker, there necessarily cannot be a path. How Neo-Advaita squares this idea with its very existence is difficult to determine. If there is no knowledge and no ignorance, there is no teacher to pass on the knowledge that there is no path, seeker, knowledge, ignorance, or doer, etc.

This is not to say that negation is not useful. Traditional self inquiry employs negation liberally. But it is half the loaf. The other half is the teachings that reveal the self, using the positive methods described throughout this book. The self is not a big empty void. Because Neo-Advaita is a nihilistic denial of the obvious, it has no methodology apart from its mindless negations.

Being Present, Dropping Suffering

Another popular teaching, “being present,” is unskillful because it does not take the vasanas into account. It is the vasanas that keep the mind worrying about the future and obsessing about the past. Desire needs to be addressed, not repressed with the technique of “being present.” The absurdity of such a teaching is evident when we look at it from the self’s point of view too. When are you not present? For you to know that you are not present, you would have to be present. If you were absent, how would you know? The karma yoga view is a simple and obvious solution to this problem, but Neo-Advaita has not discovered it, even though it is as old as the hills.

A further teaching, an injunction actually, informs the non-existent seeker to “drop” his or her suffering. How a non-existent ego would drop non-existent

suffering is beyond comprehension, but let us assume that there is an ego, and that suffering is undesirable. Suffering is a powerful tendency brought on by ignorance of the nature of the self. It is subtler than the ego and not under its control. It can be removed by inquiry, but it cannot be dropped at will like a hot potato.

Another glaring contradiction found in Neo-Advaita is the claim by the teachers that their statements stem from their own experience. It seems almost gratuitous to point out that from the self's point of view, which seems to be the only point of view Neo-Advaita espouses, there is no experiencer either. It is not the intention of the author to question the enlightenment or lack thereof of any Neo-Advaita teacher, although it is always wise for seekers to do so. It is my intention, however, to point out that enlightenment does not in any way qualify one to teach enlightenment. Furthermore, satsang, as it is conceived by Neo-Advaita, is completely insufficient as a means of self realization.

To avoid the sticky question of a teaching and a teaching methodology, with its abysmal ignorance of the tradition of self inquiry Neo-Advaita uses the argument that their titular inspiration, Ramana Maharshi, gained enlightenment without a teaching and a teacher. Aside from the fact that it is, in very rare cases, possible to realize the self without help, the odds are about the same as winning the lottery, perhaps less. Additionally, this idea does not take into account Ramana's extreme dispassion and the fact that after his enlightenment, he became a dedicated student of the science of self inquiry and actually wrote a scripture, *The Essence of the Teaching*, (Upadesa Saram) that has been accepted by the traditional Vedanta community as having the status of an Upanishad.

Qualifications for Enlightenment

Perhaps the best way to approach Neo-Advaita is not by what it teaches as by what it does not. Probably the most obvious omission is the notion of qualifications necessary for enlightenment. Neo-Advaita is burdened with an understandably democratic ethos, the idea being that anyone who walks into one of its meetings off the street can gain instant enlightenment, which is

possible if you define enlightenment as an epiphany. But then again, you can also fall down a non-dual flight of stairs and have an epiphany.

Because self inquiry defines enlightenment differently however, it insists that a person be discriminating, dispassionate, calm of mind and endowed with a burning desire for liberation along with secondary qualifications like devotion, faith and perseverance. In other words, it requires a mature adult with a one-pointed desire to know the self. The reason for these qualifications, which were discussed in chapter four, is the fact that enlightenment is a hard and fast recognition by the mind of its non-separation from everything; only a very rare individual will let go of his or her sense of individuality to gain another, albeit greater, identity. The mind must be capable of inquiring into, grasping and retaining the knowledge “I am limitless Awareness and not this body-mind.” To accomplish this, its extroverted tendency must be checked and attention directed to the self. To put forth the required effort, the individual needs to have the settled conviction that nothing in the world can bring lasting satisfaction. This conviction is what self inquiry calls maturity. To my knowledge, no Neo-Advaita teacher espouses this view. The reason is obvious: he or she would have no one to teach.

I Am Not the Doer

Perhaps the centerpiece of Neo-Advaita teachings is the idea that there is no doer. It has achieved considerable popularity in the Neo-Advaita world because it appeals to the something-for-nothing mentality. “You mean I can get enlightened without doing anything? Where do I sign up?” It also dovetails nicely with the idea of enlightenment as the absence of ego. If I do any spiritual work, I am strengthening my ego, or so the logic goes. It is true that the ego can co-opt the practice, but only if practice is done without the right understanding. This teaching, as is the case with all dogmatic statements from the self’s point of view, contradicts experience. Everyone sees himself or herself as a doer and identifies to some degree with the actions done by the body and mind at the behest of the vasanas. If a teaching denies my existence, it condemns me to remain as the doer I think I am. Traditional Vedanta agrees that you cannot do

anything to be what you are, but it suggests that you allow the science of self inquiry to help you remove your ignorance of who you are because enlightenment is a matter of understanding, not action.

Importance of Karma Yoga for Self Inquiry

It would be impossible to underestimate the importance of karma yoga for self inquiry. Karma yoga is not taught in the Neo-Advaita world because it is for the doer. Furthermore, it requires discipline and considerable patience, qualities not in evidence in people seeking instant enlightenment. It also requires continuous monitoring of one's motivations and reactions to events. Additionally, it requires a willingness to change one's attitudes. Finally, it demands a pure lifestyle because the vasanas continually divert attention away from the self. None of this is possible if I do not exist. And if I do exist, it is hard work.

Not doing will not create karma—good or bad. But, because it is impossible not to do, the idea that there is nothing to do means that the entry-level seekers will just continue to do what they have always done. No blame, but the idea that there is nothing to do will not result in enlightenment or growth. To fill the non-doing void, Neo-Advaita, thanks to Rajneesh's Zorba the Buddha idea, keeps the seeker hooked with an apparently positive injunction, "celebrate life." How celebrating is not a doing is difficult to understand, but intellectual contradictions rarely stand in the way of an immature seeker's desire to have fun. In contrast, self inquiry encourages sacrifice, the idea being that the ego cannot have its cake and eat it too. The desires that extrovert the mind need to be sacrificed for the sake of a quiet mind, one capable of meditating on the self, reflecting on the non-dual teachings, and assimilating the knowledge.

When actions conform to dharma, binding vasanas are neutralized. Dharma means that I do what has to be done, irrespective of how I personally feel about it. I do not want to pay my taxes, but I pay my taxes. I may not get a vasana for paying taxes, but I will certainly eliminate any agitation associated with noncompliance. But when my desires are all that matter, is it any wonder that whatever non-dual experience happens in the satsang, when the mind is temporarily arrested by the group energy, quickly vanishes with the appearance

of the next binding desire? This is why the Neo-Advaita world is little more than thousands of people, including the teachers, who have had scores of non-dual experiences, but who at the end of the day are still prisoners of their desires. Enlightenment is freedom from dependence on desired and feared objects.

Ramana Maharshi, who had an experience of the self at the tender age of seventeen, understood the wisdom of practice. He sat in meditation on the self in caves for about twenty years and studied the texts of both Yoga and self inquiry after he was awakened, although this is not the party line of Ramana devotees. Had he been a Neo-Advaitin, he would have immediately advertised himself as an Avatar, started up a satsang and begun instantly enlightening the world. But he had the wisdom to understand that while the epiphany was the end of his seeking, it was not the end of his work. Had it been, he could have returned home, eaten his mother's iddies and played cricket like any normal seventeen year old Tamil boy. Is it unreasonable to assume that he applied the knowledge he gained during his experience, until the mind's dualistic orientation was reduced to ash in the fire of self knowledge? The notion that his epiphany destroyed his sense of duality once and for all does not jibe with common sense.

Devotion to God

Another essential component of any valid spiritual path is devotion to God, as explained in chapter nine. Ramana gave devotion to God, meaning glad acceptance of the fruits of action, equal status with self inquiry as a spiritual path because devotion to God exhausts vasanas and breaks down the concept of doership. "Not my will, but Thine." It also teaches that God, not the ego, is the dispenser of the fruits of one's actions. But Neo-Advaita sees devotion as "duality" and has nothing to do with it. In fact, devotion works just as well as the idea of non-duality to prepare the mind for self realization because the self functions through the chosen symbol or practice to bring the necessary qualities for self inquiry into full flower.

One view that needs to be examined in this context is the notion that enlightenment can be transmitted in some subtle experiential way via the

physical proximity of a “master.” Traditional Advaita disagrees with this view for the reason that ignorance is deeply entrenched in the aspirant’s thinking and that it is only by deep reflection on the teachings that the ultimate assimilation of the knowledge is achieved. This assimilation is often called full or complete enlightenment. On the other hand, the transmission fantasy fits nicely into the Neo-Advaitic conception of easy enlightenment, as it does away with the need for serious practice. One need do nothing more than sit in the presence of a master and presto-chango!—I wake up for good. If this were true, however, the thousands who sit at the feet of enlightened masters everywhere would be enlightened.

Another half-baked idea that has gained currency in the Neo-Advaita world is the notion of “awakening.” While sleep and waking are reasonable metaphors to describe the states of self ignorance and self knowledge, Neo-Advaita assigns to them an experiential meaning that is not justified. Just as anything that lives dies, anything that wakes sleeps. The self never slept nor does it awaken. The mind does. This waking up and going back to sleep—all of which takes place in the waking state incidentally—is a consequence of the play of the gunas in the mind. When the mind is sattvic, the reflection of the awareness shining on it causes the individual to “wake up,” i.e., to experience the self, but when rajas or tamas reappear, as they inevitably do, the mind is clouded over, the experience is lost, and the mind “sleeps.” Until the extroverting and dulling vasanas are purified, the seeker is condemned to a frustrating cycle of waking and sleeping.

Where’s the Methodology?

Finally, self inquiry has survived as a viable means of knowledge because it employs a refined methodology to remove ignorance and reveal the truth. Many realize non-duality within and outside the tradition but are incapable of teaching non-duality because they are either unsuited to teach or lack a viable method—or both. Neo-Advaita’s statements to “be the space for the thoughts” or “be as you are” are not skillful teachings, because they deliver a non-dual teaching of identity in experiential language. Such teachings give the impression that something can be done to achieve awareness and that self realization can

come about through an act of will. In traditional Advaita, not only should the teacher have realized his or her identity as the self in such a way that he or she never re-identifies with the belief that the “I” is limited, but he or she should be able to wield the means of knowledge skillfully.

Many Neo-Advaita satsang teachers use a picture of Ramana to lend legitimacy and gravitas to their satsangs, while they promote one of the most famous Ramana myths, that silence is somehow the ultimate teaching. While understanding the nature of the self in silence apparently finishes seeking for a very few highly qualified individuals, silence is certainly not superior to the skillful use of words in bringing about enlightenment. This is so because silence is in harmony, not in conflict, with self ignorance, as it is with everything. One can sit in silence without instruction for lifetimes and never realize that one is the silence, meaning limitless awareness. Knowledge, however, which is a legitimate means of knowledge, destroys self ignorance like light destroys darkness. Additionally no experience, including the experience of silence, can change thinking patterns. An experience of non-duality may temporarily suspend thought or increase one’s resolve to see oneself as limitless awareness, but the notion that the “I” is limited, inadequate, incomplete and separate is hard wired. It is only by diligent practice of the knowledge “I am limitless, ordinary awareness and not this body-mind” that the mind’s understanding of reality gets in line with the nature of the self.

Why are binding desires such a major problem for anyone seeking enlightenment? Because they disturb the mind to such a degree that contact with the self as it reflects in the mind is broken, making self inquiry impossible. It is contemplation on the reflection of the self in the mind that allows the intellect to investigate the self in line with the teachings of self inquiry and gain the knowledge “I am the self.” Neo-Advaita characteristically wiggles out of the sticky trap of desire by claiming that the self is free of desire, which it is, but if I take myself to be a human being, it is definitely an impediment. If you swallow Neo-Advaita’s idea—and what experience-hungry ego would not?— it can lead to an unhealthy moral indifference. You can pursue your desires without

reference to dharma and justify your behavior with the knowledge that you are not the desirer. You are “just playing in consciousness.”

Seeking Emotional Fulfillment

There is no way to know for certain, but Neo-Advaita seems to be more about emotionally unfulfilled individuals looking for an alternative to a hectic modern lifestyle, one that offers a sense of community, than a proper spiritual path. Far from the idea of relying on the self to supply emotional needs from within, most believe that enlightenment will help them gain the worldly things that have so far eluded them, particularly love. The attenuated hugs that the followers of Osho made famous and are favored by devotees of the famous Hugging Saint are much in evidence in the meetings of popular Neo-Advaita teachers. And it is clear from the behavior of many of the teachers of Neo-Advaita who have supposedly “got it,” that their enlightenment has not significantly diminished their lust for fame, wealth, power and pleasure.

Keeping in mind the fact that everything in empirical reality is actually consciousness seeking its way back to itself, it would be unfair to suggest that there is anything sinister about Neo-Advaita. However its teachings, as I have tried to show by contrasting them with self inquiry, suffer from a lack of understanding of the nature of reality. To pass off ignorance as knowledge is not a crime; it does, however, have unfortunate effects on the unsuspecting. Although the truth is eternal and has been known forever, the comprehensive, systematic and refined teachings that crystallized into the science of self inquiry over twelve hundred years ago are obviously the last word in the enlightenment business. There is no need to reinvent the wheel, nor is an adaptation for the benefit of modern world necessary. Yes, self inquiry can always benefit from a linguistic update, but that is all. The teachings stand on their own.

I was informed recently by a friend who has considerable knowledge of the Neo-Advaita satsang world that we have now entered the “Post-Neo Advaita” period. Not surprisingly, Neo-Advaita has not lived up to its promise as a quick and easy means of liberation and people are now looking for the next most incredible path to enlightenment. It seems their prayers have been answered with the

appearance of the yang-yin duo, Kalki Avatar and his Mother God wife, founders of the illustrious Oneness University. This compassionate team will—for the modest fee of \$11,500 for a two week enlightenment course—direct special energy from a golden ball into your poor confused human cranium and rewire your brain for enlightenment. As an added benefit, you will miraculously survive the global calamity about to befall the earth in 2012, which is slated to wipe out a significant fraction of humanity. Evidently this promise of personal and global enlightenment is thinning the ranks of the Neo-Advaitans who, in typically Western fashion, are always looking for the most efficient shortcut to limitless bliss.

Does Neo-Advaita have any redeeming virtues? Just as high school is a prerequisite for university, seekers need to start somewhere and Neo-Advaita, imperfect as it is as a vehicle for spiritual practice or self realization, provides entry-level access to the idea of non-duality. Finally, because Neo-Advaita is probably more of a support group for like-minded spiritually inclined individuals than a rigorous investigation into the truth, it will continue in some form or other for the foreseeable future. But it will probably remain a lifestyle fad unless it investigates its roots and discovers the teachings of self inquiry.