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**What is the 'doctrine of duality' in religion?**

This doctrine of duality, also called 'Dvaita', or 'Maadhva siddhaanta', is the name for the doctrine of Vedanta that asserts the eternal and immutable difference between the individual soul, or *jiiva*, and the Supreme Lord, or *Iishvara* (also known as Vishnu).

**Why is Dvaita known as the 'Doctrine of Reality'?**

Because that is the correct, and preferred name; the doctrine asserts five differences, not just the one referred to above, and its scholars and proponents call it the 'doctrine of reality', where the three kinds of entities in the universe (insentient or *jada*, sentient or *chetana*, and Vishnu or *lishvara*) are all real, and the differences between any two are also real. Hence, 'tattva' means real entity, and 'Tattvavaada' means 'doctrine of real entities'. Some have also referred to *Tattvavaada as Bheda-vaada* (doctrine of difference), and also as *Bimba-pratibimba-vaada* (doctrine of object and image - to be explained later), etc. These names are not in normal use.

**What are the five differences in Tattvavaada?**

Simple - by considering the three types of entities in pair wise fashion, one can derive the list of differences between them, which are: (i) *jiiva-lishvara-bheda*, or difference between the soul and Vishnu; (ii) *jada-lishvara-bheda*, or difference between the insentient and Vishnu; (iii) *mitha-jiiva-bheda*, or difference between any two souls; (iv) *jada-jiiva-bheda*, or difference between insentient and the soul; and (v) *mitha-...
jada-bheda, or difference between two insentient. Here, 'insentient' is used to refer to all entities which are not 'chit' or having consciousness, such as matter, energy, etc. - including so-called 'living bodies' of creatures, and also such other insentient as space, linguistic or mathematical entities and their symbols, etc.

To clarify: Ishvara is a sentient Being, and the jiva is sentient also. However, this does not imply that both are fully alike; Ishvara is totally independent, while the jiva is completely dependent. It is the energization by the Ishvara that is the responsible for the activity of the jiva.

Why are the five differences important?

The understanding of these five differences is seemingly trivial, but upon careful consideration, one sees that to properly understand all of them, one needs to know the significant properties of every kind of entity in the whole universe! Thus, such understanding is not easily gained, and it is said that all misery and unhappiness is due to one's lack of understanding of one or more of these differences.

For instance, if one acts in ignorance of the Supremacy of Lord Vishnu, and suffers as a consequence, then one can be said to have falsely arrogated to oneself His unique and irreproducible properties like independence, potency, etc. Similarly, the grief one experiences due to loss of physical beauty, strength, vitality, etc., or due to the passing of a loved one, is due to the false identification of the insentient and ever-changing body with the sentient, immutable soul. In the mundane world, mistaking copper for gold, glass for diamond, etc., which are also failures to perceive difference, are known to bring grief. One who correctly and fully perceives and understands all the five differences can be said to have attained knowledge, and to be fit for mukti (liberation).

Are Dvaita and Advaita mere opposites?

Such misperception is one of the reasons why some reject the use of 'Dvaita' to refer to the doctrine of Tattvavaada. While it is true that Advaita and Tattvavaada have had many debates over hundreds of years, and that the latter denies the jagan-mithyatva (illusory nature of the universe) that is one of the fundamental tenets of Advaita, it is certainly not the case that there is disagreement everywhere, nor is it the case that one can derive Tattvavaada merely by taking the opposite of everything claimed by Advaita. But it can be said with full certainty that on most fundamental issues such as the nature of Ishvara, jiva, attainment of mukti, etc. and the two have total and irreconcilable differences.

Is Dvaita the first step towards learning Advaita (Non-Duality)?

If it is, then it is a quite large, reverse, first step! While adherents of Advaita say that by nature and everyday experience one believes in the reality of the universe, etc., and that such belief must be got rid if one is
to attain complete union with the nirguna-Brahman, no serious scholar of Advaita claims that studying Tattvavaada is a first step towards learning Advaita. For one thing, it is a rule of all learning that things learned first must not contradict things learned later; for another, Tattvavaada specifically examines and denounces many Advaita concepts, and hence, one who has learned Tattvavaada first cannot possibly accept Advaita later. In fact Advaitha has not built up a credible system of analysis where the puurva paksha or the initial proposition of Tattvavaada is examined and rejected thereby establishing Advaita. The exact reverse obtains today.

I hear and read about different religious beliefs - all preaching different concepts on God. Then what is meant by 'oneness' of all religions?

All these divisions we see on all sides, all these disputes and opposition, are caused because men cling to ritual and outward observances, and forget the simple, underlying truth. It is the outward practices of religion that are so different, and it is they that cause disputes and enmity - while the reality is always the same, and one. The Reality is the Truth, and truth has no division. Truth is God's guidance, it is the light of the world, it is love, and it is mercy. These attributes of truth are also human virtues inspired by the Holy Spirit.

What are the major beliefs in Islam?

The six basic Beliefs in Islam are the beliefs in:

1) Allah (the one God).
2) Angels of Allah.
3) Books revealed by Allah (including the final, uncorrupted revelation: The Qur'an).
4) Messengers of Allah, from Adam to Muhammad (peace be upon them.)
5) Day of Judgement -- the Day when all our actions in this life will be judged by Allah, and we will be rewarded or punished.
6) Al-Qadar or the Supremacy of the Divine Will and Knowledge.

A Muslim has to mould his or her entire life based on 'submission to God,' Islam. The most essential practices are known as the Five Pillars of Islam. They consist of the following:

1) Shahadah ('bearing witness') - The sincere belief in: 'I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is His Messenger.'
2) Prayer - Performing the five daily prayers.
3) Fasting - abstention from food and drink from dawn to sunset of every day of the month of Ramadan (a holy month in the Islamic calendar.)
4) Charity - Giving a certain portion of one's wealth yearly to the poor.
5) Pilgrimage - Performing the pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in one's lifetime as long as one is physically and financially able.

Though the above constitute the basics of Islam, the 'building' of Islam consists of more than just the 'pillars'. Being a Muslim entails constant
God- consciousness and submission to God in all spheres on life, spiritual and material.

What is the source of these beliefs in Islam?

The legal sources of Islam are the Qur'an and the Hadith. The Qur'an is the exact word of God; its authenticity, originality and totality are intact. The Hadith is the report of the sayings, deeds and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet's sayings and deeds are called Sunnah. The Seerah is the writings of followers of Muhammad about the life of the Prophet. Hence, it is the life history of the Prophet Muhammad, which provides examples of daily living for Muslims.

Do Muslims believe in Oneness of religions?

Muslims believe that God sent different messengers throughout the history of mankind. All came with the same message and the same teachings. It was the people who misunderstood and misinterpreted them. Muslims believe in Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ismail, Jacob, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad. The Prophets of Christianity and Judaism are indeed the Prophets of Islam. What is the place of worship in Islam?

The place of worship is called a Mosque or Masjid.

There are three holy places of worship for the Muslims in the world. These are:

- Mosque of aaba in Makkah,
- Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad in Madinah, and
- Masjid Aqsa, adjacent to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

A Muslim may pray anywhere in the world whether in a Mosque, a house, an office, or outside. The whole world is a place of worship. It is preferable that Muslims pray in a congregation, however, he/she may pray individually anywhere.

What is the concept of God in Islam?

It is a known fact that every language has one or more terms that are used in reference to God and sometimes for lesser deities. This is not the case with Allah. Allah is the personal name of the One true God. Nothing else can be called Allah. The term has no plural or gender. This shows its uniqueness when compared with the word god, which can be made plural, gods, or feminine, goddess. It is interesting to notice that Allah is the personal name of God in Aramaic, the language of Jesus and a sister language of Arabic.
The One true God is a reflection of the unique concept that Islam associates with God. To a Muslim, Allah is the Almighty, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, who is similar to nothing and nothing is comparable to Him. The Prophet Muhammad was asked by his contemporaries about Allah; the answer came directly from God Himself in the form of a short chapter of the Quran, which is considered the essence of the unity or the motto of monotheism. This is chapter 112, which reads:

"In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Say (O Muhammad) He is God the One God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, nor has been begotten, and equal to Him is not anyone."

Some non-Muslims allege that God in Islam is a stern and cruel God who demands to be obeyed fully. He is not loving and kind. Nothing can be further from truth than this allegation. It is enough to know that, with the exception of one, each of the 114 chapters of the Quran begins with the verse: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." In one of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) we are told, "God is more loving and kinder than a mother to her dear child."

But God is also Just. Hence evildoers and sinners must have their share of punishment and the virtuous, His bounties and favors. Actually God's attribute of Mercy has full manifestation in His attribute of Justice. People suffering throughout their lives for His sake and people oppressing and exploiting other people all their lives should not receive similar treatment from their Lord. Expecting similar treatment for them will amount to negating the very belief in the accountability of man in the Hereafter and thereby negating all the incentives for a moral and virtuous life in this world. The following Quranic verses are very clear and straightforward in this respect:

"Verily, for the Righteous are gardens of Delight, in the Presence of their Lord. Shall We then treat the people of Faith like the people of Sin? What is the matter with you? How judge you?" (68:34-36)

Islam rejects characterizing God in any human form or depicting Him as favoring certain individuals or nations on the basis of wealth, power or race. He created the human beings as equals. They may distinguish themselves and get His favor through virtue and piety only.

The concept that God rested in the seventh day of creation, that God wrestled with one of His soldiers, that God is an envious plotter against mankind, or that God is incarnate in any human being are considered blasphemy from the Islamic point of view.

The unique usage of Allah as a personal name of God is a reflection of Islam's emphasis on the purity of the belief in God, which is the essence of the message of all God's messengers. Because of this, Islam considers associating any deity or personality with God as a deadly sin, which God will never forgive, despite the fact He may forgive all other sins.

The Creator must be of a different nature from the things created because if he is of the same nature as they are, he will be temporal and will therefore need a maker. It follows that nothing is like Him. If the maker is not temporal, then he must be eternal. But if he is eternal, he cannot be caused, and if nothing outside him causes him to continue to exist, which means that he must be self-sufficient. And if the does not
depend on anything for the continuance of his own existence, then this existence can have no end. The Creator is therefore eternal and everlasting: 'He is the First and the Last.'

He is Self-Sufficient or Self-Subsistent or, to use a Quranic term, Al-Qayyum. The Creator does not create only in the sense of bringing things into being, He also preserves them and takes them out of existence and is the ultimate cause of whatever happens to them.

"God is the Creator of everything. He is the guardian over everything. Unto Him belong the keys of the heavens and the earth." (39:62, 63)
"No creature is there crawling on the earth, but its provision rests on God. He knows its lodging place and it repository." (11:6)