

Neo-Advaita

Subjects: Others

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Neo-Advaita, also called the Satsang-movement and Nondualism, is a New Religious Movement, emphasizing the direct recognition of the non-existence of the "I" or "ego," without the need of preparatory practice. Its teachings are derived from, but not authorised by, the teachings of the 20th century sage Ramana Maharshi, as interpreted and popularized by H. W. L. Poonja and several of his western students. It is part of a larger religious current called immediatism by Arthur Versluis, which has its roots in both western and eastern spirituality. Western influences are western esoteric traditions like Transcendentalism, and "New Age millennialism, self-empowerment and self-therapy". Neo-Advaita makes little use of the "traditional language or cultural frames of Advaita Vedanta", and some have criticised it for its lack of preparatory training, and regard enlightenment-experiences induced by Neo-Advaita as superficial.

Keywords: nondualism ; transcendentalism ; millennialism

1. Teachings

The basic practice of neo-Advaita is self-inquiry, via the question "Who am I?",^[1] or simply the direct recognition of the non-existence of the "I" or "ego." This recognition is taken to be equal to the Advaita Vedanta recognition of the identity of Atman and Brahman, or the recognition of the "Formless Self." According to neo-Advaitins, no preparatory practice is necessary, nor prolonged study of religious scriptures or tradition: insight alone suffices.^{[2][3][4][5]}

Poonja, who is credited as one of the main instigators of the neo-Advaita movement, saw this realization as in itself liberating from karmic consequences and further rebirth. According to Poonja "karmic tendencies remained after enlightenment, [but] the enlightened person was no longer identified with them and, therefor, did not accrue further karmic consequences."^[6] According to Cohen, Poonja "insisted that the realization of the Self had nothing to do with worldly behavior, and he did not believe fully transcending the ego was possible."^[6] For Poonja, ethical standards were based on a dualistic understanding of duality and the notion of an individual agent, and therefore were not indicative of "non-dual enlightenment."^[6] "For Poonja, the goal was the realization of the self; the illusory realm of relative reality was ultimately irrelevant."^[6]

2. History

According to Lucas^[7] and Frawley,^[4] the spiritual root of neo-Advaita is Ramana Maharshi, whose teachings, and method of self-inquiry, could easily be transposed to North America's liberal spiritual subculture.^[8] Popular interest in Indian religions goes as far back as the early 19th century, and was stimulated by the American Transcendentalists^[9] and the Theosophical Society.^{[10][11]} In the 1930s Ramana Maharshi's teachings were brought to the west by Paul Brunton, a Theosophist, in his *A Search in Secret India*.^[12] Stimulated by Arthur Osborne, in the 1960s Bhagawat Singh actively started to spread Ramana Maharshi's teachings in the USA.^[12]

Since the 1970s western interest in Asian religions has seen a rapid growth. Ramana Maharshi's teachings have been further popularized in the west via H. W. L. Poonja and his students.^{[13][14]} Poonja, better known as Papaji, "told, inferred, or allowed hundreds of individuals to believe they were fully enlightened simply because they'd had one, or many, powerful experiences of awakening."^[15] It were those students who initiated the "neo-Advaita", or "satsang" movement,^[15] which has become an important constituent of popular western spirituality.^{[9][16]} It is being spread by websites and publishing enterprises, which give an easy access to its teachings.^[16]

3. The "Ramana Effect"

Lucas has called the popularisation of Ramana Maharshi's teachings in the west "the Ramana effect".^[1] According to Lucas, Ramana Maharshi was the greatest modern proponent of Advaita Vedanta, well known for emphasizing the enquiry of the question "Who am I?" as a means to attain awakening.^[1] According to Lucas, following Thomas Csordas,

the success of this movement is due to a "portable practice" and a "transposable message".^[1] Ramana Maharshi's main practice, self-inquiry via the question "Who am I?", is easily practiceable in a non-institutionalized context.^[1] His visitors and devotees did not have to adopt the Vedantic culture, nor to commit themselves to an institution or ideology, to be able to practice self-inquiry.^[1] Ramana's teachings are transposable into a western context. Ramana Maharshi himself did not demand a shift in religious affiliation, and was himself acquainted with western religions, using quotes from the Bible.^[1] Neo-Advaita teachers have further deemphasized the traditional language and worldframe of Advaita, using a modern, psychologized worldframe to present their teachings as a form of self-help, which is easily accessible to a larger audience.

4. Western Discourses

The western approach to "Asian enlightenment traditions"^[18] is highly eclectic, drawing on various Asian traditions, as well as "numerous Western discourses such as psychology, science, and politics."^[18] Neo-Advaita uses western discourses, such as "New Age millennialism, Zen, self-empowerment and self-therapy"^[19] to transmit its teachings. It makes little use of the "traditional language or cultural frames of Advaita Vedanta,"^[16] and is framed in a western construction of experiential and perennial mysticism,^[20] "to the disregard of its social, ethical and political aspects."^[20] This "modern experiential and perennialist mystical framework" emphasizes Perennialism, the idea that there is a common, mystical core to all religions, which can be empirically validated by personal experience. It has pervaded the western understanding of Asian religions, and can be found in Swami Vivekananda and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's Neo-Vedanta, but also in the works of D.T. Suzuki and his "decontextualized and experiential account" of Zen Buddhism.^[20] It can also be found in the Theosophical Society, and the contemporary New Age culture, with influences like Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* and *The Doors of Perception*, and writers like Ken Wilber.^{[21][22]}

Gregg Lahood also mentions Neo-Advaita as an ingredient of "cosmological hybridization, a process in which spiritual paradises are bound together",^[23] as exemplified in American Transcendentalism, New Age, transpersonal psychology and the works of Ken Wilber are examples.^[24] Brown and Leledaki place this "hybridization" in a "structurationist" approach,^[25] pointing out that this is an "invented tradition", which is a response to a novel situation, although it claims a continuity with a "historic past", which is "largely factitious."^[25] Brown and Leledaki see these newly emerging traditions as part of western Orientalism, the fascination of western cultures with eastern cultures, but also the reduction of "Asian societies, its people, practices and cultures to essentialist images of the 'other'".^[26] Brown and Leledaki also note that this Orientalism is not a one-way affair, but that "there has been a dynamic interaction between Asian and Western representatives of various religious traditions over the last 150 years," and that this "blending of thought and practice" is a co-creation from modernist religious movements in both East and West.^{[27][28]}

According to Arthur Versluis, neo-Advaita is part of a larger religious current which he calls *immediatism*,^{[9][29]} "the assertion of immediate spiritual illumination without much if any preparatory practice within a particular religious tradition."^[29] Its origins predate American Transcendentalism.^[29] In *American Gurus: From Transcendentalism to New Age Religion*, Versluis describes the emergence of immediatist gurus: gurus who are not connected to any of the traditional religions, and promise instant enlightenment and liberation.^[30] These include Eckhart Tolle, and Andrew Cohen.^[31] "Immediatism" refers to "a religious assertion of spontaneous, direct, unmediated spiritual insight into reality (typically with little or no prior training), which some term "enlightenment"."^[32] According to Versluis, immediatism is typical for Americans, who want "the fruit of religion, but not its obligations."^[29] Although immediatism has its roots in European culture and history^[32] as far back as Platonism,^[33] and also includes Perennialism,^[34] Versluis points to Ralph Waldo Emerson as its key ancestor,^[32] who "emphasized the possibility of immediate, direct spiritual knowledge and power."^[33]

5. Criticism

Neo-Advaita has been called a "controversial movement,"^{[35][36]} and has been criticized,^{[37][38][39][40]} for its emphasis on insight alone, omitting the preparatory practices.^{[5][41][42]} It has also been criticised for its references to a "lineage" of Ramana Maharshi, whereas Ramana never claimed to have disciples and never appointed any successors.^{[43][44]}

5.1. Insight and Practice

Insight alone is not enough

Some critics say that seeing through the 'illusion of ego' is the main point of neo-Advaita, and that this does not suffice.^[3] ^[45] According to Caplan, the enlightenment-experiences induced by these teachers and their satsangs are considered to be superficial.^[46]

Practice is necessary

According to Dennis Waite, neo-Advaita claims to remove ignorance, but does not offer help to remove ignorance.^[47] According to Caplan, traditional Advaita Vedanta takes years of practice, which is quite different from the neo-Advaita claims.^[46] Classical Advaita Vedanta uses the "fourfold discipline" (*sādhana-catustaya*)^[48] to train students and attain moksha. Years of committed practice is needed to sever or destroy the "occlusion"^[49] the so-called "vasanas,^[41] samskaras, bodily sheaths and vrittis", and the "granthi"^[50] or knot forming identification between Self and mind,^[51] and prepare the mind for the insight into non-duality.^{[41][52][53]}

5.2. Spiritual Bypassing

Some teachers who have been associated with the Neo-Advaita movement, namely Jeff Foster^[54] and Andrew Cohen,^[55] have criticized what they argue is a tendency among leaders within the Neo-Advaita community to dismiss expressions of emotional pain or trauma as indicative of spiritual immaturity, a practice known as spiritual bypassing. Both have observed that their own insight or "awakening" did not put an end to being a human being with personal and egoic feelings, aspirations, and fears, which they no longer deem to be in conflict with healthy spiritual development. Although neither used the term "spiritual bypass", Cohen admitted that his "misguided efforts to create breakthroughs" caused "much harm" to some of his students.^[55]

5.3. Lineage

Western critics object to the perceived relation between Ramana Maharshi and Neo-Advaita,^[56] noting that Ramana never promoted any lineage,^[57] did not publicize himself as a guru,^[58] never claimed to have disciples, and never appointed any successors.^{[43][44][59]} Despite this, there are numerous contemporary teachers who assert, suggest, or are said by others, to be in his lineage.^{[7][44][60][61][62][63]} These assertions have been disputed by other teachers,^{[9][41]} stating that there is no lineage from Ramana Maharshi.^[64] Critics have also noted that Ramana and like-minded teachers like Nisargadatta Maharaj^[5] did not charge fees or donations.^[5]

5.4. Response

In response to some of these criticisms, Tony Parsons has written that classical Advaita Vedanta "is just another established religion with a proliferation of teachings and literature, all of which very successfully and consistently miss the mark," qualifying it as "one of the many systems of personal indoctrination promising the eventual spiritual fulfilment."^[65] According to Parsons, classical Advaita Vedanta "has no relevance to liberation because it is born out of a fundamental misconception," namely that there is something like a separate individual who can become enlightened.^[65] According to Parsons, this is "a direct denial of abiding oneness (Advaita)."^{[65][66]}

References

1. Lucas 2011, p. 96.
2. Jeff Foster, The birth and death of fundamentalism in non-duality and Advaita teachings.
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3. Spiritualteachers.org (Author unknown), "Neo-Advaita Demystified"
http://www.spiritualteachers.org/neo_advaita_article.htm
4. David Frawley, Misconceptions about Advaita. The Mountain Path, Sri Ramanashram
<http://www.vedanet.com/2012/06/misconceptions-about-advaita/>
5. Timothy Conway, Neo-Advaita or Pseudo-Advaita and Real Advaita-Nonduality <http://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/neo-advaita.html>
6. Gleig 2013, p. 194.
7. Lucas 2011.
8. Lucas 2011, p. 93.
9. Versluis 2014.
10. Renard 2010, p. 185-188.
11. Sinari 2000.
12. Lucas 2011, p. 99.
13. Swartz 2008, p. 306-307.

14. Lucas 2011, p. 94.
15. Caplan 2009, p. 16-17.
16. Lucas 2011, p. 109.
17. Lucas 2011, p. 97.
18. Gleig 2011, p. 9.
19. Lucas 2011, p. 108-109.
20. Gleig 2011, p. 5.
21. Gleig 2011, p. 5-6.
22. See also Sharf's "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience".[27]
23. Lahood 2010, p. 31.
24. Lahood 2010, p. 33.
25. Brown & Leledaki 2010, p. 127.
26. Brown & Leledaki 2010, p. 129.
27. Brown & Leledaki 2010, p. 131.
28. See also the influence of the Theosophical Society on Theravada Buddhism and the Vipassana movement,[33] and the influence of the Theosophical Society and western modernism on Buddhist modernism,[34] especially D. T. Suzuki.
29. "American Gurus: Seven Questions for Arthur Versluis".
<https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/sacredmatters/2015/01/12/seven-questions-for-arthur-versluis/>.
30. Versluis 2014, p. 1,2.
31. Versluis 2014, p. 1.
32. Versluis 2014, p. 2.
33. Versluis 2014, p. 3.
34. Versluis 2014, p. 4.
35. Timothy Conway, Nondual Spirituality or Mystical Advaita <http://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/nondual-spirituality.html>
36. Michaelson 2009, p. 79.
37. Lucas 2011, p. 110.
38. Lucas 2014.
39. Lucas: ... serious critiques leveled at Neo-Advaitins by more traditional Advaitins in India and North America. Disputes over the authenticity of a transposed tradition are a commonplace in the history of missionization and the spread of traditions across cultures.[6]
40. Versluis 2014, p. 233.
41. James Swartz, What is Neo-Advaita? http://www.advaita.org.uk/discourses/trad_neo/neo_vedanta_swartz.htm
42. David Frawley: "The teachings of Ramana Maharshi are often the starting point for neo-Advaitic teachers, though other influences also exist in the movement. However, instead of looking into the background and full scope of Ramana's teachings, there is often only a focus only on those of his teachings that seem to promise quick realization for all."[web 1]
43. John David, An Introduction to Sri Ramana's Life and Teachings. David Godman talks to John David. Page 6
<http://davidgodman.org/rteach/jd6.shtml>
44. arunachala-ramana.org, Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi – Great Sage or Milch cow? http://www.arunachala-ramana.org/articles/article_sage_or_milch_cow.htm
45. "Traditional Advaita says that the ego is an illusion. The 'Satsang Prophets' emphasize this as THE starting point, completely omitting that this realization may only occur at the end of years of self-inquiry and work on oneself (and not necessarily with any certainty). Once this premise is understood and the self-cheating is engaged, one obtains a constant very pleasant feeling of superiority and invulnerability. This is what they regard as being the ultimate accomplishment."[web 4]
46. Caplan 2009, p. 17.

47. Non-Duality Magazine, Dennis Waite. Interview with Non-Duality Magazine
http://www.nondualitymagazine.org/nonduality_magazine.denniswaite.interview.htm
48. Puligandla 1997, p. 253.
49. Jacobs 2004, p. 84.
50. See The Knot of the Heart http://www.advaita.org.uk/discourses/durga/heartknot_durga.htm
51. Jacobs 2004, p. 85.
52. Swartz: "Traditional Vedanta completely [...] insists that a person be discriminating, dispassionate, calm of mind, and endowed with a 'burning' desire for liberation along with other secondary qualifications like devotion, faith, perseverance and so on. In other words it requires a mature adult with a one-pointed desire to know the Self." [web 7]
53. Jacobs: "The main Neo-Advaita fallacy ignores the fact that there is an occlusion or veiling formed by vasanas, samskaras, bodily sheaths and vrittis, and there is a granthi or knot forming identification between Self and mind, which has to be severed [...] The Maharshi's remedy to this whole trap is persistent effective Self-enquiry, and/or complete unconditional surrender of the 'phantom ego' to Self or God, until the granthi is severed, the vasanas are rendered harmless like a burned out rope.[44] Ramana Maharshi: "Therefore, leaving the corpse-like body as an actual corpse and remaining without even uttering the word 'I' by mouth, if one now keenly enquires, 'What is it that rises as "I"?' then in the Heart a certain soundless sphurana, 'I-I', will shine forth of its own accord. It is an awareness that is single and undivided, the thoughts which are many and divided having disappeared. If one remains still without leaving it, even the sphurana – having completely annihilated the sense of the individuality, the form of the ego, 'I am the body' – will itself in the end subside, just like the flame that catches the camphor. This alone is said to be liberation by great ones and scriptures. (The Mountain Path, 1982, p. 98)." [web 11]
54. Jeff Foster, The birth and death of fundamentalism in nonduality and Advaita teachings.
<http://www.lifewithoutcentre.com/writings/the-birth-and-death-of-fundamentalism-in-nonduality-and-advaita-teachings/>
55. Andrew Cohen, An open letter to all my students upon return from my sabbatical
<http://www.andrewcohen.org/blog/open-letter-all-my-former-students-upon-return-my-sabbatical>
56. James Swartz: "Then in the Eighties the Western spiritual world became reacquainted with Ramana Maharshi [...] The rediscovery of Ramana roughly coincided with the rise of 'Neo-Advaita.' Neo-Advaita is basically a 'satsang' based 'movement' that has very little in common with either traditional Vedanta or modern Vedanta or even its inspiration, Ramana [...] except the doctrine of non-duality." [web 7]
57. "There have been many senior devotees of Bhagavan who, in their own right, had both the ability and authority to teach in his name. Muruganar, Sadhu Natanananda and Kunju Swami are some of those who immediately spring to mind. None of them to my knowledge ever claimed pre-eminence and the prerogative to teach. They knew two things. One, there would be many who would bow to their superior knowledge and set them up as an independent source, but secondly, they also knew that to abrogate for themselves the privilege would run contrary to Bhagavan's mission or purpose."
58. Forsthoefel 2005, p. 37.
59. "In actuality each of us is privy to his knowledge and blessing without any intermediary if we are open and receptive to the teachings. Each of us legitimately can claim lineage from Bhagavan although he himself was not part of any succession but stood alone, and in that sense of linear continuity he neither received nor gave initiation. But that is not the point, because though we each have the right to receive his grace, it is entirely different when it comes to assuming authority to disseminate the teachings. It is here we need to be very clear and separate the claims of wannabe gurus from the genuine devotees who are grateful recipients of grace."
60. Advaita Vision, Disciples of Ramana Maharshi http://www.advaita.org.uk/teachers/ramana_parampara.htm
61. Rob Sacks, An Interview with David Godman. By Rob Sacks for Realization.org. Page 2
<http://davidgodman.org/interviews/rs2.shtml>
62. Most of them are connected with Ramana Maharshi via H. W. L. Poonja, who has been criticised for too easily sending students out to "teach". [22] See, for examples, Andrew Cohen, Gangaji, [web 16] Kosi, [web 17] Eli Jaxon-Bear, [web 18] Aruna, [web 19] Lisa, [web 20] Arunachala Ramana (Dee Wayne Trammell) [web 21] & Elizabeth MacDonald, [web 22] and Yukio Ramana. [web 23] Other examples are Sri Lakshmana and Mathru Sri Sarada. [web 24]
63. The reference by those teachers to Ramana fits into Berger's notion of legitimacy, which is part of the plausibility structure, the socio-cultural context in which a set of beliefs and assumptions is accepted as "real" (see [46] Ramana's "lineage" lends legitimacy to the position and teachings of those teachers.
64. Timothy Conway: "...there's NO LINEAGE FROM MAHARSHI and most of these figures are NOT fully enlightened or liberated in any really meaningful sense of the term." [web 5]

65. Tony Parsons, The Divine Misconception: Traditional Advaita (Oneness) versus Neo-Advaita

http://www.advaita.org.uk/discourses/trad_neo/neo_parsons.htm

66. See Nathan Spoon, Truth is Tenable. Critical Responses to an Essay by Tony Parsons, for a response to Tony Parsons response. See Traditional not two-ness is better than Neo not two-ness??? for another response by Tony Parsons].

http://www.advaita.org.uk/discourses/trad_neo/truth_spoon.htm

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