

Shankara famously wrote* ...

ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः

“Brahma satyam jagan mithya, jivo brahmaiva naparah.”

This passage is typically translated, “Brahman is the only truth, the world is unreal, and there is ultimately no difference between Brahman and individual self.”

This translation, however, contains a flaw that permeates much of Eastern spiritual teaching, not because of any defect in the original, but because of bias on the part of translators and teachers who followed later.

“Jagan mithya” does not mean “The world is unreal.”

“Mithya” means “existing and not existing simultaneously,” or alternately, “neither existing nor not existing.”

The truth is, the world both exists and does not exist simultaneously; individuality both exists and does not exist simultaneously.

But in the context that “Brahman is the only truth,” the fundamental nature of the world and individuality must not, cannot, be different from Brahman.

The same passage is often presented (notably by Ramana Maharshi) as, “The world is unreal. Only Brahman is real. The world is Brahman.”

I've never been able to find where Shankara actually may have said it quite this way, but it's a wonderful teaching, and in my opinion, completely valid. This version does convey in English the paradoxical truth about the world and mithya, that it simultaneously exists and does not exist.

In Mahayana Buddhism, this is called the “Two Truths Doctrine,” (Sanskrit: “dvasatya”) which refers to “conventional” (or “provisional”) and “ultimate” truth

“For Nāgārjuna, the two truths are epistemological truths. The phenomenal world is accorded a provisional existence. The character of the phenomenal world is declared to be neither real nor unreal, but logically indeterminable.” ~ Wikipedia

*These exact words are widely circulated as a core tenet of Vedanta philosophy that is attributed to Shankara. However they don't appear in this exact form in any of Shankara's writing. The quote does appear in the 20th sloka of the *Vivekachudamani* (*Crest Jewel of Discrimination*), but without the last phrase. Some say the *Vivekachudamani* was not written by Shankara, but other, equally authoritative commentators do believe Shankara was the author. Traditionalists attribute the authorship to Shankara, others are divided in their opinions.

~ essay by Jerry Freeman