

The Vedas

Dating back about 6,000 years, the Vedas were originally compiled by the great poet-sage Veda Vyasa into four main books – *Rg Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. The Vedas were not the product of any one individual but were the inspired declarations of a number of teachers over many generations. These great masters, absorbed as they were in a state transcending all attitudes of “I” and “mine,” did not even append their names to these holy texts. The word ‘Veda’ is derived from the Sanskrit root *vid*, “to know.” Thus, ‘Veda’ came to mean “knowledge of the Truth.” Each of the four Vedas is divided into four main sections:

- ❖ Lyrical chants adoring the beauty of nature (*Samhitas*).
- ❖ Elaborate descriptions of rituals (*Brahmanas*).
- ❖ Prescriptions for various methods of subjective worship (*Aranyakas*).
- ❖ Vedanta – declarations of the highest spiritual truths (*Upanishads*).

The Upanishads

The Upanishads constitute the concluding portion of each of the four Vedas. The aggregate content of all these *Upanishads* is called Vedanta (*veda* – “knowledge,” *anta* – “the end”). In total, 108 Upanishads have been preserved and, of those, 10 are considered the principal ones: *Aitareya*, *Bhadaranyaka*, *Chandogya*, *Isavasya*, *Katha*, *Kena*, *Mandukya*, *Mundaka*, *Prasna* and *Taittiriya*. These glorious unfoldments of the Truth were traditionally learned near the feet of the master in an attitude of surrender, yet with the firm determination of realizing that the Self within is the supreme Reality.

The spirit of the Upanishads can be compared to the New Testament passages summed up in the words “I and my Father are One” and “The Kingdom of God is within you.”

The Upanishads contain statements of Truth and examples given by the teacher to the student to aid in the realization of this Truth. They also contain definitions of the deeper, intuitive meanings of OM, Truth, Reality, and God and of the Santi peace invocation.

Before studying a selected Upanishad, the students and teacher recite together the peace invocation (*Katha*, *Kena Upanishads*),

***Om Saha navatu, Saha nau bhunaktu, Saha viryam karavavahai,
Tejas vinavadhitamastu. Ma vidvisavahai.***

OM. May we be protected (teacher and pupil). May we be blessed with the Bliss of Knowledge. May we exert together (to discover the true inner meaning of the Scriptures). May our studies be thorough and faithful. May we never misunderstand each other.

OM Santi, Santi, Santih!

Peace be with us from heavenly wraths; Peace be with us from phenomenal cruelties; Peace be with us from bodily obstacles.

Brahma Sutras

These aphorisms composed by the sage Badarayana contain the very essence of the Upanishads. They were further commented upon and taught by the great Vedanta teacher of 1,200

years ago Sri Adi Sankara. These commentaries, together with other texts and works by Adi Sankara such as *Atma Bodha*, are known as Advaita Vedanta – Nondual Vedanta. This teaching expounds the existence of God (Brahman) as the limitless Supreme Reality from which everything is created. Brahman does not exclude anything, even ourselves.

Taken together, the Vedas and the Brahma Sutras are a body of knowledge that reveals the Truth of Brahman. When directly experienced, this knowledge is known as liberation (*moksha*).

Bhagavad Geeta

Hinduism's best known scripture, the Geeta, is the third authoritative source that defines the essential teaching of Vedanta. The transformation of Arjuna, whose dialogue with Lord Krishna constitutes the eighteen chapters of the *Bhagavad Geeta – The Song of the Lord*, is an example of how spiritual wisdom can transform one's life. Krishna's eighteen discourses cure Arjuna's life-crippling despondency and transform him into a dynamic warrior anchored in the spirit. Also attributed to Vyasa, the Geeta constitutes the central portion of the great epic the *Mahabharata* and contains the cream of the Upanishads.

The teachings of Sri Krishna to Arjuna constitute the philosophy of Vedanta in action. The epic unfolds as a despairing Arjuna describes to his Divine Charioteer all of the reasons why he should not fight against the enemies of his people. Krishna's response is a classic explanation of why it is essential to wake up to a true understanding of *Dharma* (the Law of Being – that which makes us what we are) and commence the heroic journey towards Self Realization.

Krishna expounds upon all of the four paths of Yoga for the manifestation of the Divine nature of the Self Within – Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Raja Yoga. He guides Arjuna to the realization that these paths followed in context with each other will solve his physical, mental, and spiritual problems.

In the closing stanzas, Krishna asks Arjuna (18.72), "*Has this been heard, O son of Pritha, with a single pointed mind? Has the distraction caused by your 'ignorance' been dispelled?*" Arjuna replies (18.73), "*Destroyed is my delusion, as I have now gained knowledge through your grace. I am firm; my doubts are gone. I will do according to your word.*"

The Lord has revealed to Arjuna his true nature. Our true nature is not something that we gain by the intervention of an outside agency. This Mighty Being within ourselves is now lying veiled beneath our own ego-centric confusions and ignorance. In his new-found understanding, born out of Wisdom, Arjuna experiences an unshakable balance established upon firm foundations. He now unhesitatingly states that "*I will do according to your word,*" for in the Geeta, Krishna stands for the Divine-Spark-of-Existence manifested as "pure awareness" or "direct experience of Truth."

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras

The Yoga Sutras comprise the first and foremost scripture of Yoga. The date of origin is no longer known but is probably around 2000 years ago. Patanjali prepared these almost 200 sutras (threads of meaning) that discuss the practice of yoga sub-divided into sections on contemplation, practice, accomplishment, and philosophical meaning. Hatha yoga, the practice of asanas, is but a part of this text, which covers a range of practices generally considered to be the science of Raja Yoga. He describes *Ashtanga*, or Eight Limbs of yoga, comprising the *Yamas* (five restraints), *Niyamas* (five observances), *Asanas* (postures), *Pranayama* (breath control), *Pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses), *Dharana* (concentration), *Dhyana* (meditation), and ultimately *Samadhi* (super conscious state). The practice of the first seven steps leads to the final goal of Samadhi, according to Patanjali.