

Vedanta – The Logic of Spirituality

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While the concept of oneness may be intellectually appealing, it is nevertheless difficult to put into practice. It's no hardship to feel oneness with great and noble beings or those we already love. It's also not too much of a stretch to experience a sense of unity with the trees, the ocean, and the sky. However, many of us balk at experiencing oneness with the cockroach or the rat – let alone the obnoxious co-worker whom we barely tolerate. Yet, this is precisely where we need to apply Vedanta's teachings and realize that all these manifold aspects of creation are united in and through divinity. The Self that is within me, the Atman, is the same Self that is within you – no matter whether the "you" in question is a saint, a murderer, a cat, a fly, a tree, or that irritating driver at the four-way stop.

"The Self is everywhere," says the *Isha Upanishad*. "Whoever sees all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings, hates none. For one who sees oneness everywhere, how can there be delusion or grief?"

All fear and all misery arise from our sense of separation from the great cosmic unity – the web of being that enfolds us. Duality, our sense of separation from the rest of creation, is always a misperception since it implies that something exists other than God. There can be no other. "This grand preaching, the oneness of things, making us one with everything that exists, is the great lesson to learn," said Swami Vivekananda a century ago.

... The Self is the essence of this universe, the essence of all souls ... You are one with this universe. He, who says he is different from others, even by a hair's breadth, immediately becomes miserable. Happiness belongs to him who knows this oneness, who knows he is one with this universe.

Why Is There Ignorance of This Truth of Ourselves?

If we enter this world without Self Knowledge, then we identify with the physical body, emotional mind, and discriminating intellect. We slowly learn to adjust and adapt to life, and we experience karmic cause and effect. This powerful energetic environment of life is known as "*maya*" in Sanskrit. *Maya* is the cause of the ignorance of our true nature, which manifests in the mind as a veiling quality (*avarana*). This covers, or veils, the Truth and causes the projection (*viksepa*) of our own egoistic interpretations of events and experiences. The objective of Vedanta is to enable us to uncover the existence of this veiling power and gradually remove its effect from our perception. We employ the techniques and enquiry processes of Vedanta to clear the mirror of the mind from the effects of *maya*, so that we may experience the joy filled life that is our birthright.

The Path of Awakening:

Our emotions, thoughts, and actions are egoistic responses to the desires to achieve, possess, and control driven by our likes and dislikes. We may have suppressed our feelings and emotions because we have been unable to exhaust or release them. We may not be aware of these limiting conditionings and mis-identifications because they are suppressed within, and associated with, our perception of who we are.

We can start on the path of awakening by nurturing a desire to know and experience the underlying truth of our existence. We thereby acknowledge that we desire to attain wisdom and spiritual insight so that the Truth of who we are can be revealed. We begin to study the Truth, learn to meditate, practice yoga, take retreats and workshops, as well as enjoy devotional practices in whatever form we find meaningful. This "work" purifies (or clears) the mind of projection, misidentification, and conditioning – which enables the Self that is always present to be revealed and known. Once on the path of awakening, we begin to experience a potent state of consciousness or "presence" free of egoistic activity.

The Yogas:

Yoga: The word *yoga* means “to yoke,” with reference to linking or yoking the individual’s spiritual process or path to a realization of the Divine. Yoga consists of four primary paths – Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, and Raja Yoga.

1. **Jnana Yoga** – is the path of Knowledge that is called **Vedanta**. Jnana Yoga involves a process of studying the appropriate texts (Upanishads, *Bhagavad Gita*, etc.), contemplating upon their word and implied meaning, and incorporating these truths into one’s daily life and practice. Jnana Yoga has the end goal of liberation from ignorance (*samsara*) leading to Self Realization.
2. **Bhakti Yoga** – is the path of Devotion. Bhakti Yoga involves the religious practice of worship of the Divine, and it includes prayer, singing or chanting, etc. Bhakti Yoga has the end goal of merging with Love Divine – existing as One without a second.
3. **Karma Yoga** – is the path of right attitude toward the performance and results of our actions: without ego, or egocentric, desires limiting our efforts or affecting the results. Karma Yoga has the end goal of merger with Love Divine, whereby the devotee perceives only the existence of Truth in all manifestations.
4. **Raja Yoga** – is the path of spiritual disciplines based on the Yoga system of philosophy ascribed to Patanjali (*astanga*). Included in this path are the practices of Hatha Yoga, meditation (*dhyana*), and Kundalini Yoga (awakening energy flows in the body). Raja Yoga has the end goal of direct experience of the Truth, together with an immediate end to the state of ignorance.

What Is Vedanta?

A system of philosophy created in India, Vedanta is a body of knowledge designed to guide the seeker through the various steps of understanding toward realizing the nature of one’s true, or higher, Self (*vicara* – self inquiry). Following this system of teaching enables the seeker to become aware of the cause and effect of events in daily life, and to discriminate between Truth (Reality) and the apparent reality of everyday existence. The objective of Vedanta is to lead the seeker into a direct experience of the Truth (Self Realization).

The teachings of Vedanta are recorded in the Upanishads, which are contained within the Vedas (ancient texts dating thousands of years into the past) and in the *Bhagavad Gita* (“The Song of the Lord” – the epic teachings of Krishna to Arjuna). Various teachers also have come forth over the ages to declare the principles of Vedanta.

Vedanta contains great insights into the psychological processes within our minds. It enables us to improve our life management skills and awareness of internal and external influences. The study of Vedanta can be combined with the practice of any religion, as one of the fundamental principles of Vedanta is that there is One Principle, Truth, or Reality. There is no religious doctrine included in Vedantic philosophy. Both Hinduism and Buddhism share the common root of Vedanta, as defined in the Vedas and *Puranas* of ancient India.

Vedanta declares that one’s true (higher) Self is complete and limitless (*poorna*). Vedanta also promises that liberation (*moksa*) from all forms of limitation that seem to bind a human being is possible here and now.

The Oneness of Existence: Unity in Diversity

(this paragraph from “Vedanta-A Simple Introduction” by Pravrajika Vrajaprana)

The underlying unity of existence is the central theme of Vedanta and an essential principle of its philosophy. Unity is the grand song of life; it is the unifying theme underlying the rich variations that exist throughout the cosmos. Whatever we see, whatever we experience, is only a manifestation of this eternal oneness. The divinity at the core of our being is the same divinity that illumines the sun, the moon, and the stars. The infinite Self exists beyond space and time.

years ago Sri Adi Sankara. These commentaries, together with other texts and works by Adi Sankara, 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.

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*, *Brhadaranyaka*, *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