



Swami Vivekananda and Vedanta Philosophy: Part 1

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1. Overview

Vedanta is one of the world's most ancient religious philosophies and one of its broadest. Based on the Vedas, the sacred scriptures of India, Vedanta affirms the oneness of existence, the divinity of the soul, and the harmony of religions. Vedanta is the philosophical foundation of Hinduism; but while Hinduism includes aspects of Indian culture, Vedanta is universal in its application and is equally relevant to all countries, all cultures, and all religious backgrounds.

A closer look at the word "Vedanta" is revealing: "Vedanta" is a combination of two words: "Veda" which means "knowledge" and "anta" which means "the end of" or "the goal of." In this context the goal of knowledge isn't intellectual—the limited knowledge we acquire by reading books. "Knowledge" here means the knowledge of God as well as the knowledge of our own divine nature. Vedanta, then, is the search for Self-knowledge as well as the search for God.

What do we mean when we say God? According to Vedanta, God is infinite existence, infinite consciousness, and infinite bliss. The term for this impersonal, transcendent reality is Brahman, the divine ground of being. Yet Vedanta also maintains that God can be personal as well, assuming human form in every age.

Most importantly, God dwells within our own hearts as the divine Self or Atman. The Atman is never born nor will it ever die. Neither stained by our failings nor affected by the fluctuations of the body or mind, the Atman is not subject to our grief or despair or disease or ignorance. Pure, perfect, free from limitations, the Atman, Vedanta declares, is one with Brahman. The greatest temple of God lies within the human heart.

Finally, Vedanta affirms that all religions teach the same basic truths about God, the world, and our relationship to one another. Thousands of years ago the Rig Veda declared: "Truth is one, sages call it by various names." The world's religions offer varying approaches to God, each one true and valid, each religion offering the world a unique and irreplaceable path to God-realization. The conflicting messages we find among religions are due more to doctrine and dogma than to the reality of spiritual experience. While dissimilarities exist in the external observances of the world religions, the internals bear remarkable similarities.

2. The Oneness of Existence: Unity in Diversity

The unity of existence is one of the great themes of Vedanta and an essential pillar of its philosophy. Unity is the song of life; it is the grand 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. There is no place where we, infinite in nature, do not exist.

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. But most 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 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.

3. The Concept of Maya

Vedanta declares that our real nature is divine: pure, perfect, eternally free. We do not have to become Brahman, we are Brahman. Our true Self, the Atman, is one with Brahman.

But if our real nature is divine, why then are we so appallingly unaware of it?

The answer to this question lies in the concept of maya, or ignorance. Maya is the veil that covers our real nature and the real nature of the world around us. Maya is fundamentally inscrutable: we don't know why it exists and we don't know when it began. What we do know is that, like any form of ignorance, maya ceases to exist at the dawn of knowledge, the knowledge of our own divine nature.

Brahman is the real truth of our existence: in Brahman we live, move, and have our being. "All this is indeed Brahman," the Upanishads—the scriptures that form Vedanta philosophy—declare. The changing world that we see around us can be compared to the moving images on a movie screen: without the unchanging screen in the background, there can be no movie. Similarly, it is the unchanging Brahman—the substratum of existence—in the background of this changing world that gives the world its reality.

Yet for us this reality is conditioned, like a warped mirror, by time, space, and causality—the law of cause and effect. Our vision of reality is further obscured by wrong identification: we identify ourselves with the body, mind, and ego rather than the Atman, the divine Self.

This original misperception creates more ignorance and pain in a domino effect: identifying ourselves with the body and mind, we fear disease, old age and death; identifying ourselves with the ego, we suffer from anger, hatred, and a hundred other miseries. Yet none of this affects our real nature, the Atman.

Maya can be compared to clouds which cover the sun: the sun remains in the sky but a dense cloud cover prevents us from seeing it. When the clouds disperse, we become aware that the sun has been there all the time. Our clouds—maya appearing as egotism, selfishness, hatred, greed, lust, anger, ambition—are pushed away when we meditate upon our real nature, when we engage in unselfish action, and when we consistently act and think in ways that manifest our true nature: that

is, through truthfulness, purity, contentment, self-restraint, and forbearance. This mental purification drives away the clouds of maya and allows our divine nature to shine forth.

Shankara, the great philosopher-sage of seventh-century India, used the example of the rope and the snake to illustrate the concept of maya. Walking down a darkened road, a man sees a snake; his heart pounds, his pulse quickens. On closer inspection the "snake" turns out to be a piece of coiled rope. Once the delusion breaks, the snake vanishes forever.

Similarly, walking down the darkened road of ignorance, we see ourselves as mortal creatures, and around us, the universe of name and form, the universe conditioned by time, space, and causation. We become aware of our limitations, bondage, and suffering. On "closer inspection" both the mortal creature as well as the universe turn out to be Brahman. Once the delusion breaks, our mortality as well as the universe disappear forever. We see Brahman existing everywhere and in everything.

4. Karma

Human suffering is one of religion's most compelling mysteries: Why do the innocent suffer? Why does God permit evil? Is God helpless to act or does he choose not to? And if He chooses not to act, does that mean he is cruel? Or merely indifferent?

Vedanta takes the problem out of God's court and places it firmly in our own. We can blame neither God nor a devil. Nothing happens to us by the whim of some outside agency: we ourselves are responsible for what life brings us; all of us are reaping the results of our own previous actions in this life or in previous lives. To understand this better we first need to understand the law of karma.

The word "karma" comes from the Sanskrit verb *kri*, to do. Although karma means action, it also means the result of action. Whatever acts we have performed and whatever thoughts we have thought have created an impression, both in our minds and in the universe around us. The universe gives back to us what we have given to it: "As ye sow, so shall ye reap" as Christ said. Good actions and thoughts create good effects, bad ones create bad effects.

Mental Imprints

Whenever we perform any action and whenever we think any thought, an imprint—a kind of subtle groove—is made upon the mind. These imprints or grooves are known as *samskaras*. Sometimes we are conscious of the imprinting process; just as often we are not. When actions and thoughts are repeated, the grooves become deeper. The combination of "grooves"—*samskaras*—creates our individual characters and also strongly influences our subsequent thoughts and actions. If we anger easily, for example, we create an angry mind that is predisposed to react with anger rather than with patience or understanding. As water when directed into a narrow canal gains force, so the grooves in the mind create canals of behavior patterns which become extraordinarily difficult to resist or reverse. Changing an ingrained mental habit literally becomes an uphill battle.

If our thoughts are predominantly those of kindness, love, and compassion, our character reflects it, and these very thoughts will be returned to us sooner or later. If we send out thoughts of hatred, anger, or pettiness, those thoughts will also be returned to us.

Our thoughts and actions aren't so much arrows as boomerangs—eventually they find their way back home. The effects of karma may come instantly, later in life, or in another life altogether; what is absolutely certain, however, is that they will appear at some time or other. Until liberation is achieved, we live and we die within the confines of the law of karma, the chain of cause and effect.

5. Reincarnation

What happens at death if we haven't attained liberation?

When a person dies, the only "death" is that of the physical body. The mind, which contains a person's mental impressions, continues after the body's death. When the person is reborn, the "birth" is of a new physical body accompanied by the old mind with the impressions or "grooves" from previous lives. When the environment becomes conducive, these samskaras again reassert themselves in the new life.

Thankfully, this process doesn't go on eternally. When we attain God-realization or Self-realization, the law of karma is transcended, the Self gives up its identification with the body and mind, and regains its native freedom, perfection and bliss.

An Absurd Universe?

When we take a hard look around us, the world doesn't seem to make much sense. If we go by appearances, it would seem that countless people have escaped the noose of fate: many an evil person has died peacefully in bed. Worse, good and noble people have suffered without apparent cause, their goodness being repaid by hatred and torture. Witness the Holocaust; witness child abuse.

If we look only on the surface, the universe appears absurd at best, malevolent at worst. But that's because we're not looking deeply; we're only viewing this lifetime, seeing neither the lives that precede this one nor the lives that may follow. When we see a calamity or a triumph, we're seeing only one freeze frame of a very, very long movie. We can see neither the beginning nor the end of the movie. What we do know, however, is that everyone, no matter how depraved, will eventually, through the course of many lifetimes and undoubtedly through much suffering, come to realize his or her own divine nature. That is the inevitable happy ending of the movie.

Karma=Fatalism?

Doesn't the law of karma make Vedanta a cold and fatalistic philosophy? Not in the slightest.

Vedanta is both personally empowering and deeply compassionate. First, if we have created—through our own thoughts and actions—the life that we are leading today, we also have the power to create the life that we will live tomorrow. Whether we like it or not, whether we want to take responsibility or not, that's what we are doing every step of the way. Vedanta doesn't allow us to assign blame elsewhere: every thought and action builds our future experience.

Doesn't the law of karma then imply that we can be indifferent to our fellow beings because, after all, they're only getting what they deserve? Absolutely not. If a person's karma is such that he or she is suffering, we have an opportunity to alleviate that suffering in whatever way we can: doing so would be good karma. We need not be unduly heroic, but we can always offer a helping hand or at least a kind word. If we choose not to do whatever is in our limited power to alleviate the pain of those around us, we're chalking up bad karma for ourselves. In fact, we're really hurting ourselves.

Oneness is the law of the universe, and that truth is the real root of all acts of love and compassion. The Atman, my true Self, is the same Spirit that dwells in all; there cannot be two Atmans. Consciousness cannot be divided; it's all-pervasive. My Atman and your Atman cannot be different. For that reason Vedanta says: Love your neighbor as yourself because your neighbor IS yourself.

6. The Avatar: God in Human Form

Swami Shivananda, one of Ramakrishna's disciples, said: "If God does not come down as a human being, how will human beings love him? That is why He comes to human beings as a human being. People can love Him as a father, mother, brother, friend—they can take any of these attitudes. And He comes to each in whatever form that person loves."

Throughout the ages, spiritual renewal has come to humanity through God manifesting in human form. The Sanskrit word "avatar" literally means "descent of God." Most of the world's religions have been given impetus and direction by these spiritual giants—the incarnations, prophets, and messengers of God. Jesus and Buddha, Rama and Krishna, Moses and Muhammad, Chaitanya and Ramakrishna—all have been torchbearers in the world of spirituality, pouring new energy into religions that were sliding into hypocrisy and self-indulgence.

The Bhagavad Gita declared thousands of years ago:

When goodness grows weak,
When evil increases,
I make myself a body.
In every age I come back
To deliver the holy,
To destroy the sin of the sinner,
To establish righteousness.

One of the great distinctions between Western and Eastern thought is that the West tends to think in terms of linear time—the world and human history having a definitive beginning, middle, and end. On this horizontal time line, God has specific, historical interventions. In contrast, the East thinks in terms of great cycles: ascension and descension, creation and destruction, growth and decay; these cycles are seen as continually repeating waves in an eternal cosmic process. Civilizations, religions, and individuals are all part of this ongoing cycle. The appearance of the avatar is essential to this eternal movement of spiritual decline followed by regeneration.

According to Vedanta, spiritual truth is eternal and universal: no particular religion or sect can have a monopoly on it. The truth that Christ discovered is the same truth that was revealed to the sages of the Upanishads; it is the same truth that Krishna and Buddha taught as well. Gautama said that there were many Buddhas before him, and in the years to come there will be many more manifestations of God on earth.

Is there a purpose in all this? Yes. First, every avatar has a specific message to impart to humanity: Muhammad taught equality and the brotherhood of humanity; Christ revealed the primacy of God's love over the letter of the Law; Buddha rejected priestcraft and taught people to be lamps unto themselves; Krishna taught mental equanimity and detached action; Ramakrishna taught the ideal of the harmony of religions. Each incarnation has a message particular to the age in which he appears.

The second reason why the avatar incarnates is to reestablish the one eternal religion—spiritual truth. While every avatar has specific teachings, all incarnations come to pour spiritual fire into a world sinking into religious mediocrity. No matter where the avatar appears on earth, the entire world is uplifted and regenerated by his advent.

Does this mean that, according to Vedanta, God can be realized only through his personal aspect? No. Does this mean that Vedanta says that we must think of God as a person? No.

What Vedanta says is that God can and does manifest through human form, and that, for most people, it is easier to meditate upon and love a God with form rather than a nebulous idea of infinite being, consciousness, and bliss. This, however, is a matter of temperament. Many people achieve spiritual growth through meditation upon the avatar; they are followers of the path of bhakti

yoga. Yet for others this is entirely the wrong approach: those who are more intellectual than emotional may well achieve greater spiritual awareness through jnana yoga.

7. Harmony of Religions

"Truth is one; sages call it by various names," the Rig Veda, one of Vedanta's most ancient texts, declared thousands of years ago.

We are all seeking the truth, Vedanta asserts, and that truth comes in numerous names and forms. Truth—spiritual reality—remains the truth though it appears in different guises and approaches us from various directions. "Whatever path people travel is My path," says the Bhagavad Gita. "No matter where they walk, it leads to Me."

If all religions are true, then what is all the fighting about? Politics, mostly, and the distortions that cultures and limited human minds superimpose upon spiritual reality. What is generally considered "religion" is a mixture of essentials and nonessentials; as Ramakrishna said, all scriptures contain a mixture of sand and sugar. We need to take out the sugar and leave the sand behind: we should extract the essence of religion—whether we call it union with God or Self-realization—and leave the rest behind. Whatever helps us to manifest our divinity we embrace; whatever pulls us away from that ideal, we avoid.

The carnage inflicted upon the world in the name of religion has precious little to do with genuine religion. People fight over doctrine and dogma: we don't see people being murdered over attaining divine union! A "religious war" is really large-scale egotism gone berserk. As Swami Prabhavananda, the founder of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, would smilingly say, "If you put Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammad in the same room together, they will embrace each other. If you put their followers together, they may kill each other!"

Truth is one, but it comes filtered through the limited human mind. That mind lives in a particular culture, has its own experience of the world and lives at a particular point in history. The infinite Reality is thus processed through the limitations of space, time, causation, and is further processed through the confines of human understanding and language. Manifestations of truth—scriptures, sages, and prophets—will necessarily vary from age to age and from culture to culture. Light, when put through a prism, appears in various colors when observed from different angles. But the light always remains the same pure light. The same is true with spiritual truth.

This is not to say that all religions are "really pretty much the same." That is an affront to the distinct beauty and individual greatness of each of the world's spiritual traditions. Saying that every religion is equally true and authentic doesn't mean that one can be substituted for the other like generic brands of aspirin.

Every Religion Has a Gift

Every religion has a specific gift to offer humankind; every religion brings with it a unique viewpoint which enriches the world. Christianity stresses love and sacrifice; Judaism, the value of spiritual wisdom and tradition. Islam emphasizes universal brotherhood and equality while Buddhism advocates compassion and mindfulness. The Native American tradition teaches reverence for the earth and the natural world surrounding us. Vedanta or the Hindu tradition stresses the oneness of existence and the need for direct mystical experience.

The world's spiritual traditions are like different pieces in a giant jigsaw puzzle: each piece is different and each piece is essential to complete the whole picture. Each piece is to be honored and respected while holding firm to our own particular piece of the puzzle. We can deepen our own spirituality and learn about our own tradition by studying other faiths. Just as importantly, by studying our own tradition well, we are better able to appreciate the truth in other traditions.

Deepening in Our Path

Just as we honor the various world religions and respect their adherents, we must grow and deepen in our own particular spiritual path--whatever it may be. We shouldn't dabble in a little bit of Buddhism and a little bit of Islam and a little bit of Christianity and then try a new combo plate the following week. Spiritual practice is not a smorgasbord. If we throw five varieties of desserts into a food processor, we'll just get one unpalatable mess.

While Vedanta emphasizes the harmony of religions, it also stresses the necessity of diving deep into the spiritual tradition of our choice, sticking with it, and working hard. To paraphrase Ramakrishna, If you want to dig a well, you have to choose your location and keep digging until you reach water. It doesn't do any good to dig a bunch of shallow holes.

While a shallow spiritual life is probably better than no spiritual life at all, it nevertheless doesn't take us where we want to go: to freedom, to God-realization. Once we choose which spiritual path we wish to follow, we should doggedly pursue it until we reach the goal. The point is, we can do this while not only valuing other traditions, but also learning from them.

This packet was compiled from the online resources of www.vedanta.org.

