

What Is Vedanta?

By Roger Gabriel (Raghavanand)

This is the message of Vedanta: “What is that which, by being known, everything else becomes known.”

We often hear the word *Vedanta* in yoga classes, meditation groups, and spiritual gatherings. What is Vedanta, and where does it come from?

Veda means “complete knowledge” and *anta* means “end.” Simply put, Vedanta means the culmination of Vedic wisdom or the final step on our spiritual journey. We don’t know how old the Vedas are or who wrote them. It’s said that God revealed the true knowledge of the entire creation to enlightened saints while they were deep in meditation. The Vedas are therefore said to be *shruti*, divine knowledge, or knowledge that is heard from a divine source rather than learned from a book. The saints then brought these eternal truths out to the world in the form of Sanskrit hymns and chants, which continue to be passed down and recited even now.

The Four Vedas

- The *Rig Veda* is mainly composed of joyful songs praising the divinity of nature. This is the primary Veda, said to contain the knowledge of all the others.
- The *Sama Veda*, sometimes referred to as the “Veda of chants” or “knowledge of chants,” is made up of text primarily from the Rig Veda, set to various melodies. Indian classical music and dance have their roots in the Sama Veda.
- The *Yajur Veda* gives instructions for the correct performance of sacred offerings, which allow participants to direct the forces of nature for their benefit and well-being.
- The *Atharva Veda* contains formulas, spells, and guidelines relating to life and was the beginning of the medical sciences. Ayurveda is a subdivision of this Veda.

The Four Sections of Each Veda

- The *Samhitas* are a collection of hymns and prayers.
- The *Brahmanas* discuss the mystic significance or knowledge behind the performance of sacred ceremonies so that the intended results may be gained.
- The *Aranyakas* are often referred to as the “forest texts” as they are intended for those who have withdrawn from ordinary daily life. They provide the deeper meaning and interpretation of the sacred ceremonies.
- The *Upanishads* give us philosophical speculations and a search for the one underlying reality of all things. They give us a glimpse of the goal and the path for our spiritual journey whereby the individual soul reaches the universal reality, the truth within.

The word *Upanishad* can be translated as “to sit close by,” so this part of Vedic knowledge was usually reserved for advanced students, who would gather around their teacher for the higher teachings.

As it represents the final teachings of the Veda, originally Vedanta meant the *Upanishads*. However, nowadays Vedanta is used to describe a system of philosophy based on a study of the *Upanishads*. India has six systems of philosophy based on the Veda. The two on which the Chopra Center bases its programs are the yoga philosophy developed by Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras*, which gives us a very practical path to enlightenment; and Vedanta, as described by the eighth century sage Shankara, which gives us knowledge of higher states of consciousness and enlightenment (*samadhi*).

The teachings of Vedanta are mostly found in the texts of the *Upanishads*, the *Brahmas Sutras*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Upanishads* give us the goal, the *Bhagavad Gita* gives us practical advice for getting there, and the *Brahma Sutras* discuss the nature of human existence and summarize the teachings of the *Upanishads*. Other later texts such as the *Yoga Vasistha* and the *Ashtavakra Gita* are also considered to be Vedantic in nature, as are the writings of more recent Neo-Vedantist teachers Sri Ramana Maharshi, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo.

Vedanta explains the relationship of the unmanifest absolute reality (Brahman) to the manifest aspect of life. Although Brahman appears to undergo a transformation, no real change takes place. Vedanta explains this by introducing the principle of *maya*, or “that which does not exist.” *Maya* can only be known by its influence. Through the

influence of maya, Brahman remains unchanged but appears as the manifest world. Vedanta also describes the grosser levels of maya, known as *avidya* or ignorance of the true self (Atman). Through the effect of maya, Brahman is seen as *Ishwara*, the personal God (creator); and through the effect of ignorance, Atman appears as *jiva* or the individual soul.

The Core Teachings of Vedanta

- Brahman is the ultimate reality, beyond space and time, and name and form—and without beginning or end.
- Brahman manifests through maya as the multi-creation and thus the universe is a constantly changing illusion. Space begins when we have a body, time begins when we start thinking, and causation begins when we apply limitations. The world disappears when there is no thought, such as in deep sleep and in transcendental consciousness, and so the world is in the mind.
- Human beings are divine and their real nature is Atman—infinite, pure, and eternal. Strengths and weaknesses, good and bad, and right and wrong are all in the mind. This ignorance disappears in the light of pure knowledge.
- We can learn to recognize our divinity through the four paths of yoga (union), karma (selfless service), gyana (knowledge of the self), bhakti (love and devotion), and raja (techniques such as meditation).
- Truth is universal and can't be limited by race, religion, or personal choice. It may be expressed in different ways. All ultimately lead to the same truth.

Swami Vivekananda observed, "In the West, if a man doesn't believe in a God outside himself, he is considered an atheist, whereas Vedanta says that a man who doesn't believe in himself is the atheist."

There are several schools of Vedanta. Advaita Vedanta was the main focus of Shankara's teachings and is a central wisdom teaching shared by the Chopra Center. Advaita concerns itself with the correct understanding, knowledge, and interpretation of the sacred texts, together with direct personal experience. Understanding, verified by direct experience, removes the veils of ignorance, leading to the realization that Atman and Brahman are one, and opens the door to enlightenment.

It is said that the knowledge contained in Vedanta is so perfect that ordinary human intelligence has difficulty understanding it. While the experience of higher states of

consciousness is the goal of Vedanta, consciousness must first be raised in order to begin to comprehend it. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, himself a great proponent of Vedanta said, "Knowledge is structured in consciousness," meaning that as our consciousness expands, so will our understanding of the true reality of life.

Vedanta offers us knowledge of the goal and the ways in which to achieve it, such as:

- Meditation
- Discernment
- Non-attachment
- The six treasures: discipline of the mind, discipline of the sense organs, abstaining from worldly longings, endurance, faith, and mental equilibrium
- The desire for liberation

Finally, Vedanta says it cannot show us Brahman because we are that already. It can only help remove the veils that hide the truth. We can never be free on the earthly plane but we are always, already free in the spiritual realm.

About the Author

Born in Liverpool, England, Roger Gabriel spent his formative years in the United Kingdom and first learned meditation there in the early 1970s. It instantly became his passion and he soon trained to be a meditation teacher under Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

After moving to the U.S., Roger began studying Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of health care. In 1985, while helping to establish centers for Ayurveda and meditation, he met and became friends with Deepak Chopra. Since then, Roger has assisted Deepak with numerous training programs, seminars, and workshops; taught thousands of people on all continents to meditate; and assisted in training hundreds of people to become teachers of meditation, Ayurveda, and yoga.

Roger has been blessed to meet and study with great teachers in India and the West, and he has traveled extensively in India. He incorporates much of what he has learned in his practices and teaching. In 2006, Roger received his spiritual name Raghavanand from Shree Satuwa Baba Maharaji of Varanasi, India.

As time permits, he involves himself with charity programs in India and takes like-minded seekers on tours to some of his favorite pilgrimage sites there. Roger currently serves as a member of the Chopra Center Certification's Advisory Board and is a Chopra Center–certified Master Educator who teaches regularly at the Center's workshops, seminars, and teacher training programs. When not traveling, he lives in Encinitas, California.