

What is Vedanta?

A. The Oneness of Existence

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 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. "There is fear from the second," says the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. 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."

B. 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.

C. Karma and Reincarnation

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.

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.**

D. Yoga – Spiritual Practice

“Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy — by one, or more, or all of these — and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.” —The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol 1, Preface to Raja-Yoga

“The grandest idea in the religion of the Vedanta is that we may reach the same goal by different paths; and these paths I have generalised into four, viz those of work, love, psychology, and knowledge. But you must, at the same time, remember that these divisions are not very marked and quite exclusive of each other. Each blends into the other. But according to the type which prevails, we name the divisions. It is not that you can find men who have no other faculty than that of work, nor that you can find men who are no more than devoted worshippers only, nor that there are men who have no more than mere knowledge. These divisions are made in accordance with the type or the tendency that may be seen to prevail in a man. We have found that, in the end, all these four paths converge and become one. All religions and all methods of work and worship lead us to one and the same goal.” —The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol 1, Ch 8, “The Ideal of Karma Yoga”

The Path of Love: Bhakti Yoga

“The path of devotion is natural and pleasant. Philosophy is taking the mountain stream back to its force. It is a quicker method but very hard. Philosophy says, ‘Check everything.’ Devotion says, ‘Give the stream, have eternal self-surrender.’ It is a longer way, but easier and happier.”

—The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol 7, Inspired Talks, Thursday, July 11

1. Path of love and devotion to God
2. Prayer
3. Repeating the name of God, japa
4. Singing
5. Chanting
6. Worship
7. Offering flowers, incense or food

The Path of Meditation: Raja Yoga

“The science of Raja-Yoga, in the first place, proposes to give us such a means of observing the internal states. The instrument is the mind itself. The power of attention, when properly guided, and directed towards the internal world, will analyse the mind, and illumine facts for us. The powers of the mind are like rays of light dissipated; when they are concentrated, they illumine. This is our only means of knowledge.”—The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol 1, Chapter 1 Introductory

“...but all such are especially and earnestly reminded that, with few exceptions, Yoga can only be safely learnt by direct contact with a teacher.

“... each man is only a conduit for the infinite ocean of knowledge and power that lies behind mankind. It teaches that desires and wants are in man, that the power of supply is also in man; and that wherever and whenever a desire, a want, a prayer has been fulfilled, it was out of this infinite magazine that the supply came, and not from any supernatural being.” —The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol 1, Preface to Raja-Yoga

- 1. Control of mind through meditation**
- 2. Use of mental powers to realize the Atman, true Self**
- 3. Instruction, initiation, is transmitted individually to an aspirant by a teacher, or guru**

The Path of Knowledge: Jnana Yoga

“The sages of the world have only the right to tell us that they have analysed their minds and have found these facts, and if we do the same we shall also believe, and not before.” — Swami Vivekananda, Jnana Yoga

- 1. Discrimination between real and unreal**
- 2. Non-dualistic, or advaita Vedanta**
- 3. Self-affirmation**
- 4. Discovery of one's true nature**

The Path of Work: Karma Yoga

“Karma-Yoga is the attaining through unselfish work of that freedom which is the goal of all human nature. Every selfish action, therefore, retards our reaching the goal, and every unselfish action takes us towards the goal; that is why the only definition that can be given of morality is this: That which is selfish is immoral, and that which is unselfish is moral.” —The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol 1, Ch 8 The Ideal of Karma Yoga

- 1. Dedicated work**
- 2. Selfless service**
- 3. Unattachment to the fruits of labor**

E. Ethical Principles – Yama

Yama consists of nonviolence, truthfulness, nonstealing, chastity or celibacy, and the nonreceiving of gifts. Niyama consists of cleanliness, contentment, austerity, study, and self-surrender to God.

Nonviolence: While many of these disciplines seem self-evident, some of them need further explanation. Serious spiritual aspirants, Swami Vivekananda said, “must not think of injuring anyone, by thought, word, or deed. Mercy shall not be for human beings alone, but shall go beyond, and embrace the whole world.”

Truthfulness not only means speaking truthfully but also adhering to the truth in thought, word, and deed. Ramakrishna said that “making the heart and lips one” was the spiritual discipline of our age.

Nonstealing also means noncovetousness: it means not desiring things that belong to others and not appropriating what belongs to others. Even using someone else’s words or ideas and presenting them as our own without acknowledging their source is a kind of stealing.

Chastity or celibacy is stressed for two reasons: First, serious spiritual seekers need to conserve the energy generally directed to sex and to redirect it to Self-realization. Second, physical or mental sexual activity reinforces our idea of ourselves as bodies and not as Spirit. If we want to progress in spiritual life, we need to regard other people as human beings—as manifestations of God—and not as male and female bodies.

We should add here that Vedanta is meant for all people—not simply those with monastic inclinations. Vedanta acknowledges that sexual desire is, at its core, longing for union with God. While strict celibacy is stressed for monastics, Vedanta advocates sexual responsibility and self-control for nonmonastics. For nonmonastics, chastity means fidelity to one’s spouse. Further, when approached in the right spirit, marriage is a sacred spiritual path. One’s spouse is also one’s spiritual partner and should be looked upon as a manifestation of divinity.

Non-receiving of gifts: The ethical virtues listed above may seem fairly reasonable, but what’s the problem with accepting gifts? We can see from this guideline how carefully the ancient Hindu sages watched the workings of the mind. Accepting gifts from others makes us feel obligated: we can become manipulated through them and lose our independence. Sometimes gifts are really bribes in disguise: if we feel even vaguely indebted to the giver, our minds become tainted. Sometimes the effect is obvious, sometimes it is subtle; but it is there nonetheless. For this reason we should accept no gift unless it is given with no motive except pure love. Otherwise we’ll be like puppets who jump whenever the invisible strings are pulled.

Ethical Principles – Niyama

Niyama consists of cleanliness, contentment, austerity, study, and self-surrender to God.

Cleanliness means not only physical cleanliness but also mental and moral cleanliness. When our minds are jealous, suspicious, rancorous or just plain mean, our minds are “dirty.” We can take all the baths in the world but we still are failing in cleanliness if our minds are polluted. Cheerfulness is an essential component of mental cleanliness.

Contentment is tied to mental cleanliness because a dissatisfied mind is a turbulent, unhappy mind. We should be content with our present condition, and move forward. Contentment doesn’t mean laziness: it doesn’t mean that we should be satisfied with our current state of spiritual progress. We should have divine discontent but at the same time be satisfied with the externals that we are presented with.

The word “austerity” generally makes people shudder. They shouldn’t though, because we all practice austerities all the time, we simply don’t use the word. No great endeavor can succeed without austerity: a student must study hard in order to get good grades, a parent must sometimes give up sleep in order to care for a sick child. Our jobs demand hard work and long hours.

Spiritual austerity is much sweeter than all these put together, for the goal to be attained is the highest. Austerity in Vedanta means disciplining the body and mind in order to put them at our disposal for the realization of God. It also means keeping an even keel in the tempests of life.

Life generally presents us with what Vedanta calls “the pairs of opposites”: praise and blame, health and sickness, prosperity and penury, joy and misery. We cannot get one without eventually getting the other; they are two sides of the same coin. Keeping our mental poise in the midst of all of these is true austerity: neither being elated by praise nor depressed by criticism, neither being haughty in prosperity nor dejected in poverty. Evenness of mind under all conditions is genuine austerity, for the ego is given no opportunity to come into play.

Study—which comprises not only the study of sacred literature but also the repetition of a mantra or name of God—is vital for spiritual aspirants. Firm regularity in practice is also included in the discipline of study.

While routine might seem counterproductive to spiritual development, it is, in fact, crucial. The force of a regular habit of spiritual study insures that—like it or not, tired or not, interested or not—we will doggedly pursue our highest ideals. The nature of the mind is fickle: sometimes it’s in a good mood, sometimes it’s not. Sometimes it’s energetic, sometimes it’s lazy. We can’t allow our spiritual life to become subject to the mind’s whims. A regular habit of study creates a favorable mental atmosphere: at the appointed time the mind will naturally become quiet since it has been trained by repeated habit to react that way.

F. 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.

Different Paths to the Same Goal

Vedanta says that all religions contain within themselves the same essential truths, although the packaging is different. And that is good. Every human being on the planet is unique. Not one of us really practices the same religion. Every person's mind is different and every person needs his or her own unique path to reach the top of the mountain. Some paths are narrow, some are broad. Some are winding and difficult and some are safe and dull. Eventually we'll all get to the top of the mountain; we don't have to worry about our neighbors getting lost along the way. They'll do just fine. We all need different approaches to fit our different natures.

Despite external variations in the world religions, the internals are more alike than not. Every religion teaches similar moral and ethical virtues; all religions teach the importance of spiritual striving and the necessity of honoring our fellow human beings as part of that striving.

“As different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea,” says an ancient Sanskrit prayer, “so, O Lord, the different paths which people take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.”

Vedanta Society of Southern California