

INTRODUCTION TO VEDANTA

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The Meaning of Nondual Vedanta

All people of intelligence eventually awaken to some degree to the presence of God in their lives, and, depending on what religious or philosophical environment they happen to be in at the time of that awakening, they tend to interpret their spiritual experience in that context. The person living in a Moslem intellectual environment interprets his experience through the Koran, and worships Allah; the Hindu gives his heart to Krishna or Shiva; the person inundated with Buddhist ideas sees his awakening in Buddhist terms; the Jew relates strongly to the religious history of his forefathers and looks to Yahweh; the Christian describes his path in Christian terms, and the Platonist in Platonist terms. But, of course, they are all turning in the same direction. If they reach the object of their yearning, they transcend sectarian interpretations and come to know directly the Source of their attraction, and realize that It is beyond all religious tradition, containing all traditions and yet transcending them all.

We may picture the many spiritual seekers of various traditions as a group of men widely scattered around the base of a peaked mountain; each starts up the mountain from his own place and wends his way along his own mountain path. From their individual perspectives, each appears to be far apart from the other, with different destinations. But each, as he nears the top, draws nearer the others, and eventually all reach the very same mountaintop. It is then they realize that the destination each sought, though each along his own unique pathway, was ultimately the same for all. And once they have reached the pinnacle of their quest, they come to know directly the One they sought, and realize It as the eternal and universal Self of all. As the 16th century mystic, Dadu, said so well: “Ask of those who have attained God; all speak the same word. ... All the enlightened have left one message; ... it is only those in the midst of their journey who hold diverse opinions.”

My aim is to reveal the perspective of the enlightened, those who have reached the pinnacle at the end of their journey, all sharing a common vista. We find today many who have attained that summit of knowledge and who

espouse a common perspective based on that universal knowledge; they are to be found in every religious tradition that exists. However, it is only rarely that we find an acknowledgement that this unitary knowledge was originally expressed in its fullness and perfection in the written scriptures of that most ancient of lands, India, in a tradition known as *Vedanta*, the purest and most concisely expressed understanding of Nonduality. Vedanta is not Hinduism; Hinduism is a religious tradition, with its own rites and customs; but Vedanta is a rational philosophical expression of the direct knowledge of Unity. Vedanta may be expressed in the tradition of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism; but it is none of them. It is the essence and guiding principle of them all. It is the heart of each of them, the string on which the pearls of all religious traditions are strung. Vedanta is a perspective based, not on the teachings of any one particular person, but on the common experience of countless souls since the beginning of time.

Vedanta means “the end of the Veda,” and was originally intended to signify the collection of writings called the *Upanishads*, which were written nearly three thousand years ago by some anonymous Indian sages and appended to the earlier *Vedas* as their final portion. But the word, *Veda*, simply means “knowledge,” or “wisdom”; and so, the real meaning of *Vedanta* is “the end of knowledge,” in other words, it is “the ultimate wisdom.” In this broader interpretation, Vedanta refers, not only to the Upanishads, but covers the whole body of literature which explains, elaborates and comments on the Upanishadic teachings from their conception to the present day. It is synonymous with “the perennial philosophy,” that universal knowledge of Unity possessed by all the mystics and sages of past and present. In this sense, Vedanta is the culmination of all knowledge seeking. It is the final philosophy, recurrently discovered by seekers of Truth in every age.

Because it is the highest knowledge possible to man, the philosophy of Vedanta does not appeal to those without the courage and desire to ferret out the Truth for themselves. But those minds long accustomed to enquiry and Truth-seeking will experience a thrilling surge of joy upon discovering the philosophy of Vedanta. For it provides all the missing pieces to the puzzle of life and makes the total picture puzzle at last intelligible and perfectly clear. What a moment it is for the long-searching intellect when it finally comes across the truths expressed in Vedanta! What excitement it feels on having all its doubts dispelled, like cobwebs swept from the newly lighted corner of a room. How happy it feels on looking out upon a world perceived

as for the first time bathed in clarity and light!

What is it then, about Vedanta that infuses the mind with such delight and happiness? Reduced to its elements, the philosophy of Vedanta consists of three propositions: First, that man's real nature is Divine. Second, that the aim of human life is to realize this Divine nature. Third, that those first two propositions constitute what we know as "religion," and that, therefore, all genuine religious traditions are essentially in agreement. It is the teaching of all genuine religion that our separative ego, our vaunted individuality, is but a flimsy charade; and that who we really are beneath the ever-changing tide of thoughts and impressions which flood our minds, is that one, bright, undivided Consciousness whom men call *God*. He is the one supreme Self of all selves, "the One who has become many"; and the realization of our eternal and ever-joyful Self is the realization of the Truth that shall make us free.

It is the aim of Vedanta to show men the way to realize and become established in the awareness of their true, Divine, Self. A thousand years before Jesus asserted, "I and the Father are one," the Upanishads declared: *aham brahmasmi*, "I am Brahman"; and *tat twam asi*, "That thou art." These assertions are not merely high-flown theories or mere suggestions to bolster the ego, but are the confident declarations of those who, in a moment of rare quietude and clarity, have seen through the veil of appearance and come face to face with their eternal Identity.

It is of utmost importance to understand that Vedanta is not a mere speculative *theory* about the nature of Reality; it is the account of Reality by those who have "seen" It and known It—much more clearly than you see these words before you. It must be approached therefore as the sacred knowledge that it is. We must open ourselves to be taught, with an eagerness to look beyond the limitations of language and of our own conceptual framework, in order to understand what the seers of Truth have to say. If their words are true, they will not contradict our own rational judgment. If they are true, they will stir us to new heights of mental clarity and intellectual delight; and they will have the power to inspire us toward the realization of our own Divine Self.

Historical Origins

The *Vedas* may be thought of as the “Old Testament” of Indian religion, insofar as they represent, for the most part, the views of an archaic Indian priesthood who had not the benefit of mystical vision, but who taught men rather to accept a conciliatory relationship to a pantheon of warring, jealous gods. The *Vedas*, which comprised the oral religious tradition imported into India at the time of the Aryan invasion (ca. 2000 B.C.E.), tended to hypostasize various natural elements and forces, attributing to them lurid personalities and histories, much as did the mythologies of ancient Greece. The *Upanishads*, on the other hand, were the esoteric writings of the *rishis*, the seers, the rare sages of ancient times, who had actually realized the unitive Reality through their own contemplative experience.

The *Upanishads*, as well as the *Bhagavad Gita*, may be thought of, therefore, as comprising the “New Testament” of the Indian religious tradition, which, while expanding upon the old Vedic writings, also supplants them by transcending the polytheism and anthropomorphism of the more elementary *Vedas*. However, neither the *Upanishads* nor the *Bhagavad Gita* should be thought of as the “authority” of Vedanta in the same sense as some take the Bible to be the authority of Judaism and Christianity. The authority of Vedanta is one’s own personal experience of enlightenment. But the *Upanishads* are the earliest and clearest expression of the mystical, or unitive, experience and of the knowledge resulting from such an experience; and for that reason, they hold an honored place in the world of religious literature. They stand as testimony and proof of the common perennial knowledge available throughout the history of the world to all who earnestly seek to know their origin and their destination in this life; and all who have come to attain that knowledge have acknowledged the authenticity and purity of these ancient testaments.

Of the many recognized *Upanishads*, twelve are regarded as of primary importance and merit. In philosophical clarity and persuasiveness, these few represent what, for most of us, are to be considered “The Upanishads.” Their names are: *Isha*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Chandogya*, *Brihad-aranyaka*, *Aitareya*, *Taittiriya*, *Svetasvatara*, and *Maitri* Upanishads. The authors and exact date of authorship of these individual spiritual treatises are unknown; we know only that they were written, by various anonymous sages who had realized that Truth of which they speak, sometime between 1200 B.C.E. and the first few centuries of the Current

Era. While they vary in length and in style, their one common theme is the inner realization of the identity of the Self (*Atman*) and God (*Brahman*). We may seek to know God, or we may strive to know our Self; but, say the *Upanishads*, when you find the one, you will find the other as well—for they are one. It is this inner discovery, which constitutes enlightenment.

In its long history, Vedanta has had many enlightened sages, many holy saints, to serve as its glorious representatives. Indeed, it may be said that even those enlightened souls of other lands and other religious traditions—such as the 3rd century Roman, Plotinus, or the 13th century Christian, Meister Eckhart, or the Sufi, Ibn Arabi—may be regarded as representatives of Vedanta, insofar as their experiences and their teachings are wholly consistent with the philosophy of Vedanta. But there is one historical figure who played a most prominent role in revitalizing Vedanta by his writings, his teachings and his very life: that man is the medieval Indian *acharya*, or teacher, known as Shankara.

Shankaracharya lived sometime between the 7th and 9th centuries, during a time when Vedanta had become almost forgotten and nearly supplanted throughout the Indian landscape by Buddhism. And even those who clung to the ancient ways tended, for the most part, to make of Vedanta nothing more than a priestly Brahmanism based primarily on the adherence to conventional Vedic ritual and the laws of behavior governing the various castes. It was Shankara who brought, through his single-handed efforts, a return to the unitive philosophy of the *Upanishads* and a reawakening of the Indian spirit to its long-established heritage of spiritual wisdom.

Before his death in the Himalayas at the age of thirty-two, Shankara authored many independent treatises as well as commentaries on ancient Vedantic texts; he re-established the monastic tradition on a firm footing; and he traveled the length and breadth of India on foot, teaching the truth which he had realized in himself, and which corroborated the teachings of the ancient *rishis*. He taught also the means whereby one could realize, as he had done, that eternal Lord of the universe. Here are his own words:

Gain experience directly. Realize God for yourself! Know the Self as the one indivisible Being and become perfect. Free your mind from all unnecessary distractions and dwell in the consciousness of the Self.

This is the final declaration of Vedanta: Brahman is everything; it is this universe and every creature. To be liberated [from ignorance] is to live in the continual awareness of Brahman, the undivided Reality. ¹

Shankara's philosophy, the philosophy of Nondual Vedanta, may be characterized by the use of a simple formula taken from his writings; it is this:

brahma satyam
jagan mithya
jivo brahmaiva napara

(God is the Reality;
 The world is illusory.
 The soul [or self] is, indeed, nothing else but God.)

In the following sections, these three subjects: God, the world, and the Self, will be discussed in the light of the above statement.

God

The beginning student of Vedanta will have to become accustomed to many different names for God, as it has long been recognized in the Indian religious tradition that God cannot be limited to any particular name or form. It was stated in the *Vedas*: "Truth is one; men call It by many different names." The important thing to understand is that beneath the various names—*Brahman*, *Purusha*, *Rama*, *Shiva*, *Hari*, *God*, *Allah*—the Reality is one and the same.

The word most commonly used in the Upanishads for God is *Brahman*. By "Brahman" is meant the limitless Awareness, the universal Consciousness that is experienced in the contemplative state. That universal Consciousness is, of course, beyond names and images, since It is That which exists prior to the manifestation of name and form; but, from another perspective, every name that can be uttered is God's name, as there is no name or form that is not His manifestation.

Brahman, as He/It is manifest as the phenomenal universe, exists as both the

subjective and the objective Reality. He may be intuited in the objective world, but He can only be *directly* known as the *subjective* Reality, i.e., from within yourself as *I*. The objective Reality is that which is perceived, either as subtle form (on the mental, or psychic, level), or as gross form (on the sensual level). The subjective Reality is the perceiver, the Witness. It is that very consciousness which we experience as our very own existence. That is Brahman; and it is That which is to be known. This is clearly explained in the *Upanishads*:

What cannot be spoken with words, but *That* whereby words are spoken: know *That* alone to be Brahman and not what people here adore. What cannot be thought with the mind but *That* whereby the mind can think: know *That* alone to be Brahman and not what people here adore. What cannot be seen with the eye, but *That* whereby the eye can see: know *That* to be Brahman and not what people here adore. ²

... It is not speech we should wish to know; we should know the speaker. It is not the things that are seen that we should wish to know; we should know the seer. It is not sounds that we should wish to know; we should know the listener. It is not the thoughts that we should wish to know; we should know the thinker. ³

The experience, or “revelation,” of Brahman is an experience, which changes forever the perceived identity of the experiencer. For, having experienced Brahman, he has experienced his real, eternal, Self. In that rare awakening, he experiences his own consciousness as the limitless Consciousness of the universe. It is the background Reality to all that is manifest as universal phenomena. While immersed in that infinite Awareness, one is able to perceive that all the various worlds and galaxies of this vast universe are but the spreading rays of love expanding from one’s own Self. All that we call “the world” is nothing but the Divine projected Light of that one Consciousness, which manifests as the evolving universe and then is withdrawn again, back into that unfathomable Consciousness. Like breaths alternating from inspiration to expiration, this creation-destruction cycle repeats itself eternally. Each “breath,” though momentary from the perspective of that Awareness, contains the millions of ages required to evolve and then dissolve the myriad worlds presently evolving their destinies throughout space.

The ordinarily time-bound consciousness which experiences this glimpse into timeless Awareness is overwhelmed by this experience. While deeply immersed in it, he is God, he is eternal, he is alone—without a second; and there is no limited consciousness to distract his attention by responses of awe and amazement. There is nothing but himself; and nothing could be clearer or more obviously true and natural. But after the absorption of the limited identity into the universal has waned, and the time-bound ego resurfaces, then the reflective mind is struck with bewilderment and awe. With breathless humility and gratitude, it realizes only gradually the immensity of the experience that has come to it. “I am all this!” it exclaims incredulously. “All this universe is only my Self. I am the one Consciousness. There is no one but Me!”

Who is this one supreme Self, which includes all selves? What shall we call It? The ancient *rishis* of India who experienced It called It “Brahman.” But because It is always experienced only as the subject, the I-consciousness, It is commonly referred to in the *Upanishads* also as the *Atman*, which means, “the Self.” *Atman* and *Brahman* refer to the same One. In other words, Vedanta declares that God and the Self are one: God is who *you* are. Whether you know it or not, *you* are That; *tat tuam asi*. This is not merely a pleasant and convenient theory; it is the truth that has been experienced directly by countless souls since the beginning of time.

The World

The mystic who experiences Brahman, the unitive Reality, in the contemplative state, experiences that Unity as himself. In fact, if he were something other than That, it would no longer be a Unity, but a duality. And while experiencing himself to be Brahman, the one pure Consciousness, he experiences also that all the manifested universe is but his own projection, much as a thought-form is the projection of an individual mind within itself. It is his own radiation, his own glory. No matter what words one uses to describe it—whether as a “projection,” an “imaging forth,” a “superimposition,” a “manifestation of Divine Will”—it cannot be adequately described, as we have nothing in our worldly experience with which to compare it.

It is a unique and indescribable experience that the mystic confronts. He

knows that he is the unchanging Ground, the Absolute, pure Consciousness; and yet simultaneously, he is exuding an inconceivably complex universe of evolving worlds in which he himself lives, as one lives within his own dream. This creative expansiveness is similar to the expansion of love, which we, as humans, feel in the heart for all creatures, or like the emanation of a thought-image increased to an infinite degree of power and light. It is quite beyond telling, except to say that within the one Being these two complementary aspects exist: the one infinite and unchanging—an unblinking Consciousness, pure and clear like the vast blue sky; the other, a Power of manifestation which creates the world in which all creatures and things exist. Seers have called these two aspects by many different names, such as “Godhead and Creator,” “*Theos* and *Logos*,” “Light and Darkness,” “*Purusha* and *Prakrti*,” “*Shiva* and *Shakti*.” Vedantists often refer to them as “*Brahman* and *Maya*.”

One who has experienced Brahman and has known this complementarity of aspects within the one Reality knows without a shadow of a doubt that the world is a projected Energy-manifestation of the universal Self. In other words, this world is nothing but God. Indeed, if a “world” is seen, that is an illusion—because what is seen is really nothing but God. To postulate a “world” as a second thing is to postulate an absolute Duality. But duality is merely God’s illusion; there is never anything but the One. The forms perceived by the senses, the forms perceived by the mind; the ideas, the images, the pleasures, the pains—all God’s. It is all His dream-like creation; nothing is separate from Him. All is God and nothing but God.

However, we must understand that, so long as we perceive a “world,” there is an apparent duality; *apparent*, because, while there is always One and One alone, there is the appearance of two-ness. Take, for example, the Sun and its rays: it appears to be two things, but, in fact, it is one thing. Or take the mind and its thoughts: they are apparently two. But no, there is only the mind. Shall we say, then, that the rays are unreal, imaginary? Or that the thoughts are non-existent? No. Nor can we say they are ultimately real. They have no independent reality; that is to say, they do not exist independent of their source. It is like that also with God and the world. The world is a manifestation of God; and from that perspective, the two are one. But God is eternal, while the world has but an ephemeral transient appearance, like a thought. Therefore, like a thought, the world is neither real nor unreal. Vedantists call it “*Maya*.”

Maya is just another name for God's Power of manifestation, His Power of world-projection. That Power is inherent and co-eternal with God—whether there is a creation or not. But *Maya* is both the (eternal) Cause and the (temporal) effect. *Maya* is God's Power (*shakti*); and *Maya* is also the world-illusion produced by that Power.

Anyone who has studied the analysis by modern-day physicists of the sub-atomic world of matter must have come to the realization that all this world of various forms is composed simply of Energy, or "fields of force"; and that every form that exists is merely an "appearance" conjured by this mysterious chimera called "Energy." That Energy is God's Power of illusion, i.e., *Maya*. It is God's *Maya* that creates what we regard as the "objective" universe.

All experience of the world is dependent upon there being both a subject and an object, in other words, a seer and a seen. It should be clear that if you have only the subject, the seer, nothing can be experienced unless you have also the object, the seen. Or, if you have only the object, the seen, but do not have a subject, a seer, still nothing is experienced. We have all heard the conundrum, which asks, "If a tree falls in a forest, and no one hears it fall, was there really a sound?" The question might also be stated as, "If a tree falls in a forest, and no one sees it, did it really fall?" Modern physics has shown quite clearly that the subject, the seer, is an integral ingredient in the existence of an object, that which is seen. For example, the manner in which one observes a quantum particle determines its manner of existence; indeed, without the perceiving subject, the object cannot be said to exist at all. The one exists only so long as the other exists.

This is the view of Vedanta as well. There must be both the subject and the object; otherwise, there is only God, absolute, undivided. God has made Himself into both the subject and the object, the seer and the seen. This is how He has created all this drama within Himself. It is all Himself, of course; but, in order to make for any kind of experience at all, He had to provide out of Himself both sides; He had to become both the subject and the object. Now, keep in mind, there is really nothing else but God; He is playing both these parts. So, you are That also.

When you examine yourself, you find that, in your makeup, there are also these two sides, these two aspects: there is the subject, the "I"; and there is also that which is experienced through the senses as the body, and also as the

thoughts, dreams, images that play before the subjective “I”. These things are the objects of your experience. Of course, there is also the world outside of your body and mind; all that too is seen, experienced, as the “object.” So, you can see that everything has this (apparent) two-sidedness. So long as there is a world, there will be “two;” in other words, an *apparent* duality. Only when the objective, thought-producing, mind is merged back into God, are we able to realize directly the truth that there is ultimately only One.

The Self

The Self is Brahman, the universal Consciousness. It is the one “I” that everyone experiences as the Self. In the *Upanishads*, the question is asked, “Who is the Self?” And the reply given is that, “The Self is the witness of the mind.” It is that inconspicuous Witness behind all of our various states of mind, which is our true, everlasting Self, and not those various states of mind themselves, with which most of us identify. The Self is the only Reality; but, since we tend to identify with the separative mind and the transient body, we lose sight of our eternal nature as pure Consciousness. Yet, that pure Consciousness is always there; and It is manifest as our bodies and our minds.

If we reflect, “Who am I? Am I the body? Am I the mind or the intellect?” we quickly realize that who we are eternally is none of these; we are truly the one pure Consciousness that is witnessing all these. For example, in the waking state, who is it that is looking out from behind your eyes reading this? Who is witnessing all the forms around you? Is it only the senses? Only the mind? No. *You* cannot be the mind, because you are witnessing the activity of the mind. Is it not so? And, in the dream state, who watches the dreams and remembers them upon awaking? And, in the deep sleep state, if *you* were really asleep, who was it that experienced that blissful nothingness, and who knows that it was a sound and deep state of peace that was experienced? It is clear to the discriminating mind that, in all three states, there is an unchanging Consciousness which is not involved in the activities of those states, but who witnesses them, and who is the real *you*, the eternal Self, independent of the mind and body. That is our true Identity.

There is a fourth state, which can be experienced in deep meditation. It occurs when the mind becomes entirely pure and still and merges into that universal Consciousness. Then, one becomes aware, “I am everything! All

this universe is only my Self! And yet, though all these things and beings are contained in Me, I am forever One and undifferentiated. Truly, I am Consciousness and Bliss.” Such a state is not just imaginary; it is not just a theory. Many people have experienced such a state. It is the experience of that which underlies all of the great philosophies and religions of the world and constitutes the wisdom of all the saints. Listen to what the seers of the *Upanishads* said:

When a man has seen the truth of the Spirit, he is one with Him; the aim of his life is fulfilled, and he is ever beyond sorrow.⁴

When a man knows God, he is free; his sorrows have an end, and birth and death are no more. When in inner union he is beyond the world of the body, then the world of the Spirit is found where man possesses all—for he is one with the One.⁵

When a sage sees this great Unity, and realizes his Self has become all beings, what delusion and what sorrow could ever approach him?⁶

... When awake to the vision of one’s own Self, when a man in truth can say: “I am He,” what desires could lead him to grieve in fever for the body?

... When a man sees the *Atman*, his own Self, the one God, the Lord of what was and of what shall be, he fears no more.⁷

In the Vedantic tradition, such an awareness is said to be “Liberation.” Jesus of Nazareth also spoke of this freedom that is attained through knowledge of the Truth: “You shall know the Truth,” he said, “and the Truth shall make you free.” Why does the knowledge of Truth make you free? Because, when you become aware that you are all pervading, you no longer suffer under the illusion that you are a limited individual being. You will go on playing your role as a father, a mother, a wife, a doctor, a lawyer, a beggar, or king; in fact, your enjoyment in playing your role will be increased manifold. But you will also be at rest within, in the joyful awareness of your perfect Self, infinite and eternal—like an actor, who earnestly plays his role on stage, but who remains conscious throughout the drama that he is not the character whom he is playing. He does not identify with the fortunes or misfortunes of his *dramatis personae*, but remains free within, happy and

secure in the knowledge of his true identity.

It is this truth that we must come to know and understand: Just as waves on the ocean are only water, just as golden ornaments are only gold, so all the various forms in the universe are only your Self. When you know this, and make it a part of your understanding, you will begin to revel in that joy that had been missing in your life before. You will begin to drink the nectar of the love for which you had been thirsting before. And you will begin to take delight in simply being and living and acting in the world in a much more fulfilling way than you had been able to before. Indeed, the knowledge of the Self is the only means to real fulfillment, and enduring happiness. To know the Self is the aim and destiny of all human life.

The question then arises, “How can I attain it?” And the answer is: “The Self is already attained!” The Self has never left you; in fact, It can never go away. You *are* that eternal Self! The body will go; the mind will go. But *you* will always be. This is the truth. This is the liberating knowledge of all the wise seers and sages of every land of every time. It is found in the sacred scriptures of the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Jews, the Muslims, and in the teachings of Jesus. All say the same: You are the eternal Self, the Source and Witness of your thoughts. That is who you really are. But because you are not aware of it, you identify with the mental activity and the transient worldly forms, and, forgetting your real Identity, you become swept away in the agitated currents of the mind. It is just this false identification, which is the source of all your woes and troubles. And if you could become aware of your true, eternal, Self, the various thought-forms that arise would be powerless to affect you one way or the other.

Another question that may arise is that of the relationship of the individualized, transmigrating soul to the ultimate Self, the Divine Unity. This question is also resolved in the teachings of Vedanta. All the seers of the Self have acknowledged the existence of an individualized soul; but, they say, it has no permanent existence. The individualized soul is really nothing more than a congregation of mental tendencies, which, while continuing throughout many lifetimes, must eventually come to an end when its real essence is realized. Listen to what Shankaracharya had to say about it:

The Self is the Witness, beyond all attributes, beyond action. It can be directly realized as pure Consciousness and infinite

bliss. Its appearance as an individual soul is caused by the delusion of our understanding and has no reality. By its very nature, this appearance is unreal. When our delusion has been removed, it ceases to exist. ⁸

This is why enlightenment is regarded as “liberation from the round of birth and death.” As Shankaracharya says:

The transmigrating soul is not different from the Lord. ⁹ ... Just as the light of the Sun and the Sun itself are not different, so also the soul and the supreme Self are not different. ¹⁰

Because all souls are essentially not different, and their apparent difference is due only to ignorance of the Self, the individual soul, after having dispelled that ignorance by true knowledge of the Self, becomes one with the Self. ¹¹

This, indeed, is the teaching of all who have truly known the Self. When the Self is experienced, they say, there is no soul. All duality is swallowed up. The seeker and the sought, the seer and the seen, the “I” and the “Thou,” are no longer two in the experience of Unity. Only the Self experiences the Self.

It is this experience, this realization, of the eternal Self, which, according to Vedanta, constitutes salvation, or liberation. We find this stated in every piece of Vedantic literature, including all the Upanishads. It is not a very difficult concept to grasp: The Self is the truth of the universe; It’s the truth of ourselves. It’s who we really are. There’s truly no one here but you! And to know, to really know, this Truth is the attainment of the final knowledge and the ultimate freedom.

How To Know The Self

What, then, is the means to attain this knowledge, according to Vedanta? Those who have known the Self say that there are basically two different paths to the attainment of Self-knowledge: (1) The path of identifying with the soul (also called the path of Devotion); and (2) The path of identifying with the Self (also called the path of Knowledge).

There are times when, as an individual soul, you feel the necessity of

approaching God as His child, His devotee, His servant. The love in your heart bubbles up and expresses itself as devotion to the Lord of the universe. This is the noblest and highest path for the soul, to focus on God within itself with true humility and love in simple prayer and worship. You will joy in the singing of His name, and in serving Him in all His creatures, and in remembering His presence at every moment in every place.

And there are other times, when you become quiet, and your breathing becomes shallow and soft, and you taste something of the certainty of your eternal and limitless Selfhood. Then you rest in that quietude, that solitary joyfulness—without thought, without movement, aware only of your own infinite presence. This is meditation, a glorious practice. It enables one to become centered in the Self, to rise above all the vicissitudes of temporal life, and to remain established in peace and goodwill, attuned to the inner joy, and seeing the one Divinity in all creation.

Both of these practices, the devotional and the meditative, are perfectly valid; they are both firmly based in Truth. For remember, we are both distinguishable from, and at the same time, identical with, the one Consciousness. Just as a ray of sunlight is both distinguishable from and also identical with the sun, or as a thought-image is both distinguishable from and yet identical with the mind, or as a wave is at once distinguishable from and yet identical with the ocean, so we, too, possess this complementarity in our identity.

Whether we turn, as a soul, to our Lord and God, or turn, as the Self, within to our own Identity; in both instances, we are looking toward the one Light. We should come to understand ourselves so well that we can worship God with heart-felt love at one moment and know Him as not different from our inner Self at another moment, and not feel the slightest contradiction in so doing. This whole world of creation is God, and it is also God's. If God in the form of His creature lovingly worships God, the Creator, who is going to object? Remember, He, the One, is both the subject and the object; He is both the worshipper and That which is worshipped; He is the lover and the Beloved; and he is the love as well.

It is only the One who has become many; and there is nothing else but the One in the many. Beneath the differences lies the Undifferentiated. It is that one supreme Self who is spread out everywhere in all these variegated forms—in the drifting cotton-puffs of clouds, and in the moist soil beneath

our feet. It is our own Self who is the life-pulse in every form of life—in trees, crustaceans, amphibians, in every weasel and woodchuck in its burrow. Every yearning human soul you see is you. Every loving heart eager for God is your own. The crystal-clear eyes of every illumined soul are bright with your love. You have cast yourself into the magical forms of man and woman for the sake of delight, for the sake of joy. If we are to live in the Truth, we must learn to expand our vision and our love to embrace all that exists. This is the teaching of Vedanta. Listen, now, to the words of the *Upanishads*:

These three: the soul, the world, and the Lord of all,
Are nothing else but the one Brahman.
It's Brahman alone who exists as everyone and everything;
beyond Brahman, the Self, there is nothing further to know.¹²

That one conscious Self, the smallest of the small, the greatest
of the great,
Conceals Himself in everyone's heart.
The wise, by the grace of God, become free
When they see that majestic and desireless Self within. ¹³

When the Lord is known, then a man's soul is freed;
He'll never know sorrow or birth again.
Through devotion, he'll rise to the highest state,
And rest forever in the bliss of God. ¹⁴

To that effulgent Lord who's in fire and in seas,
Who lives as this world, who's in plants and in trees,
To that Lord let us sing! Give all glory to Him!
To that Lord let us sing! Give all glory to Him!¹⁵

Meditation

The essence of Vedanta is “Surrender to God!” The essence is “Cling to His feet!” Vedanta means “Remember Him constantly; lift yourself to Him by the strength of your desire!” How can one express the essence of Vedanta? It is a state of the soul when it's buoyed up by grace.

Vedanta's essence is intimacy; "Be dissolved in His Bliss!" The offering of one's heart, mind and body in service of God is the essence of Vedanta; it is the wisdom of love. It is unshaken confidence in the strength of the soul: "Identify with Him; be as great and as good!"

There is one Life, one Mind, one infinite Ocean of Truth. He is manifest as souls, as the sea manifests waves. Vedanta is the awakening of the wave to its Truth; it is the soul's joyful recognition of its infinite Self.

NOTES:

1. Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*; Swami Prabhavananda & Christopher Isherwood, Hollywood, Vedanta Press, 1978, pp. 112-113.
2. *Kena Upanishad*, I:4-6.
3. *Kaushitaki Upanishad*, III:8.
4. *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, II:14.
5. *Ibid.*, I:11
6. *Isha Upanishad*, I:7
7. *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad*,
8. Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*; Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1978, p. 64.
9. Badarayana, *The Vedanta Sutras of Badarayana* (2 vols.); I:1:5, George Thibaut (trans.), 1962, Vol. I, p. 51.
10. *Ibid.*, III:2:37, Thibaut, George (trans.), *The Vedanta Sutras Of Badarayana* (2 vols.); N.Y., Dover Publications, 1962, Vol. II, p. 174.
11. *Ibid.*, III:2:36, Thibaut, 1962, Vol. II, p. 173.
12. *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, I:12
13. *Ibid.*, III:19
14. *Ibid.*, I:11
15. *Ibid.*, II:17

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