What Is Vedanta?
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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. These 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

- *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.

- *Sama Veda*, sometimes referred to as the Veda of Chants or knowledge of chants, is comprised of text primarily from the *Rig Veda*, set to various melodies. Indian classical music and dance have their roots in the *Sama Veda*.

- *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.

- *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

- *Samhitas*, which are a collection of hymns and prayers.
- *Brahmanas*, which discuss the mystic significance or knowledge behind the performance of sacred ceremonies so that the intended results may be gained.
- *Aranyakas*, often referred to as the “forest texts” as they are intended for those who have withdrawn from ordinary daily life.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.
- *Upanishads* give us philosophical speculations and a search for the underlying one 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 that the Chopra Center based its programs around 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 7th-century sage Shankara, to give 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 summarizes 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, in fact 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**

1. Brahman is the ultimate reality, without a second, beyond space and time, name and form, without beginning or end.

2. Brahman manifests through Maya as the multi-creation, thus the universe is an illusion constantly changing. 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, so the world is in the mind.

3. Human beings are divine and their real nature is Atman—infinitive, pure, and eternal. Weaknesses, good and bad, right and wrong are all in the mind. This ignorance disappears in the light of pure knowledge.

4. 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).
5. 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 used 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, as our consciousness expands, so will our understanding of the true reality of life.

Vedanta offers us knowledge of the goal and also 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 on the spiritual.
Born in Liverpool, England, Roger spent his formative years in the United Kingdom. He first learned meditation there in the early 70’s, which instantly became his passion and he soon trained to be a meditation teacher under

- See more at: http://www.chopra.com/ccl/what-is-vedanta#sthash.yfmb82Hf.dpuf