

# Vedanta Is a Means of Self-Knowledge

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**Seeker:** Dear Ram, you said that the *Gita* or maybe Vedanta do not contain concepts but is/are a means of knowledge. Can you elaborate on this? I also wondered, does Vedanta have an actual meaning?

**Ram:** The two questions are connected. *Vedanta* is a compound word, *veda* and *anta*. *Veda* means “knowledge” and *anta* means “end.” So Vedanta is the knowledge that ends one’s search for (self-) knowledge. Once the self is known as it is, everything else is as good as known since the self is (the essence of) everything and without the self, awareness, nothing can be known. In other words, when you realize that you are whole and complete you no longer need to know or gain anything, since whatever you might know or gain would not affect your

fundamental sense of self. A person who thinks of himself or herself as a limited being always believes that he or she will be changed in some way by the knowledge he or she gains. But “relative” knowledge always pertains to things – the material world or the psyche – and does not reveal the nature of the self. Yes, you could gain relative knowledge, information, to solve problems in the world, but this knowledge would not change your basic state of mind. So in an esoteric sense Vedanta means “self-knowledge.”

Exoterically, Vedanta refers to the *Upanishads* (plus the *Brahma Sutras* – commentaries on an *Upanishad* by a great sage – and the *Bhagavad Gita*, both of which draw their ideas from the *Upanishads*) because the *Upanishads* which are appended to the *karmic* portion of the *Vedas* are treatises on the self. The *karmic* portion of the *Vedas* presents rituals that enable one to gain things in this world and the next. This knowledge is useful for living a relatively happy life – getting what you want and avoiding what you don’t – but it is not useful for self-knowledge, the knowledge that you are not a wanting being, that you are free of want. Those who see themselves as limited and incomplete are bedeviled by innumerable wants.

I didn’t mean to say that Vedanta did not have concepts. I meant to say that Vedanta uses concepts in a very unusual way – to remove self-ignorance. Vedanta is a group of *prakriyas*, teachings, about the nature of the world, the mind and the self that is called a *pramanam*, a means of knowledge. Just as eyes are necessary to know forms, ears are necessary to know sounds and an intellect is necessary to know ideas, one needs a means to know the self. But since the self is beyond all known means of knowledge, that is, it cannot be objectified like sense objects, emotions and thoughts, another means is necessary. And that means is Vedanta.

Vedanta does not claim to give enlightenment, because it says that there is only one self and that self is *chaitanya*, awareness. So the self is already enlightened. Vedanta does not promise to give you something you don’t already have – like *yoga* or Hinayana Buddhism, which says that if you follow a certain path you will “attain” a state of limitless bliss, *nirvikalpa samadhi* or *nirvana*. Vedanta says that the self already is limitless bliss. It is *samadhi*, equal seeing. It is *nirvana*, desireless.

So why don’t I know myself in this way? Why don’t I feel, experience it? Because I

have certain ideas, an unquestioned conditioned way of thinking about myself and the world that keep me from seeing the truth of my being – that I am limitless awareness, that the “I” is free of desire. To phrase it another way, “I am already enlightened.” Therefore Vedanta sets out to remove my ignorance – which is standing in the way of appreciating myself as non-dual being, actionless awareness.

It is not conceptual, like a philosophy or a school of thought, because if it works properly you are not left with a bunch of ideas about who you are or about the nature of the world. The knowledge of what things actually are removes the misunderstandings about what they are, and then it too disappears from the mind, leaving only you, pure awareness – which of course was there all along. Vedanta works rather like an alkaline substance that neutralizes an acid. In the process, the alkaline ceases to be alkaline and the acid ceases to be acid. In this way it removes both ignorance and knowledge. This is not to say that you end up like a spaced-out zombie unable to function in the world because you have forgotten what it is. This does not mean that you could not conceptually formulate an approximation of who you are, the nature of the mind and material reality, but that you understand that who you are in no way depends on any concepts – like “I am a man/woman, rich/poor, white/black, gay/straight, the daughter/son of my father/mother, etc.” or any of the plethora of other limited identities that human beings are capable of concocting.

So how does this work? Can I just study the *Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sutras*, the *Bhagavad Gita* or any of the dozens of other Vedantic texts and remove my ignorance of who I am? Probably not, unless I was very highly evolved, meaning that I’d had at least several important epiphanies and had developed a subtle, inquiring mind. This is so because someone striving to know who he or she is is admittedly ignorant and does not know that scripture is meant to be used to remove doubts about the nature of reality, not to convert one to a religion and/or encourage belief in a deity. The ideas of Vedanta are not meant to be believed in – they are to be understood – because belief is ignorance. Yes, one’s positive beliefs may make life more liveable – but they do not remove the sense that one is limited, that the self is, for example, a

“sinner,” to use a particularly obnoxious (Christian) small-self identity.

Self-ignorance varies from individual to individual. As you know from your own experience, a person can be completely ignorant of an aspect of himself or herself that a therapist or even a man on the street, for example, can spot immediately. So the *prakriyas*, the teachings, require a teacher, and not someone who has merely read the texts and does not know in a concrete way that he or she is the self – what in India are called *pundits*. Even if you understand the teachings intellectually, you may take them out of context and not understand how to apply them to your own ignorance. So a teacher contextualizes them and shows you how to apply them. Since ignorance is working all the time, in the presence of a teacher or not, one needs to “practice knowledge” until the last vestiges of (self-) ignorance are removed.

If you study a philosophy or a school of thought, the “you” remains and a bunch of ideas, which may or may not form your identity, is added to you. But Vedanta helps you strip off the notion that you are a limited being, a separate or individual self, by revealing your limitless nature. The meaning of the word “*Upanishad*” contains the idea of destruction of ignorance (*shad*) by revealing what “sits nearest” (*upani*) to you, i.e. the self.

Only very few are qualified for Vedanta because most people do not think that the way they think of themselves is a problem – they are locked into various ego identities and are concerned with gaining experiences from which they may pick up a bit of happiness – or avoid a bit of misery. But after a while it becomes clear that experience cannot remove my sense of limitation and inadequacy; my desires and fears, which are just signs of my incompleteness, continue to plague me. So I need to seek another solution; I need to think about myself and life in another way. Then Vedanta can help because it provides a wider view, the view from the self, one that includes and transcends the individual.

So where do Vedanta's teachings come from? They are the distilled experience of tens of thousands of people who realized the self, whose limited identities were supplanted by the one universal identity. For many thousands of years these people contributed to this body of knowledge and refined it so that it is now free of belief and opinion. And in the process of communicating it, a method of transmission involving logic and common sense evolved which was handed down with the knowledge itself. So someone on whom Vedanta has been wielded can as well wield it on someone else. A philosophy or a school of thought can modify over time as new ideas come in and old ones are no longer deemed relevant. But this does not happen to Vedanta and it will not happen, because the fundamental identity problem of human beings never changes and the teachings of Vedanta solve the problem as they always have – so there is no need for it to change. While it has retained its original purity in some lineages in India, unfortunately, *yoga* doctrine, the notion that enlightenment is an experience to be gained through certain practices, has co-opted Vedantic language in the last one hundred years in both India and the West, and a confusing and unhelpful hybrid, which is neither *yoga* nor Vedanta has developed.

I understand that what I am saying is not common knowledge, as Vedanta has been presented for a long time as if it were a school of thought or a philosophy. This is due to the fact that the teachings are downright interesting and brilliant on the intellectual level and can have a big impact on one's life – merely as ideas. I had no knowledge of it at all, but was led to it like a moth to the flame by the burning desire I had to be free. And one day I found myself at the feet of a great Vedanta master and had the teachings wielded on me with great skill – and they set me free.

I trust you're well. My best to Cathy. See you soon.

~ Love, Ram

Below is a short article I wrote on identities that you might find interesting.

### **Supermarket of Identities**

I recently read an article in *The Guardian's* supplement on a topic that is dear to my heart – identity. The article was entitled "I'm a girl – just call me 'he.'" It went on to document one of the most recent additions to the potpourri of identities available in Western societies, specifically a variety of no-hormones, no-surgery New York lesbians called "boy poseurs." The article said this group is "all fiercely intelligent, aged from 16 to 26 and identified variously as "boiz," "hes," "shes" and one "queer genderfreak trans-boygirl fagdyke."

The article, which was served up with a generous dollop of humor, went on to ask “Have the Americans gone too far this time? On one hand the ‘transboy’ movement seems fantastically avant garde – after all, why should it be possible to buy at least six different kinds of bagels in New York city and yet be limited to a mere two choices of gender?” Apparently this group of women chafes under the onerous inequities that identifying with one’s gender confers and believes that by calling themselves “hes” they will “sink the gender boat.” According to a prominent feminist, Jami Weinstein, “If biological females use the pronoun ‘he’ enough, then the power of ‘he’ as an essential category will be eroded and maybe one day ‘he’ and ‘she’ will be on an equal plane.” One twenty-six-year-old (female) lawyer says, “I choose to use the name Dean and masculine pronouns. In part this feels right because most people who look at me take me to be a woman, so using these words helps to disrupt that process a little and opens a space for me to be something more complicated than that, which I feel better fits who I really am.”

The article went on to describe some of the additional practices that this group have taken up to free themselves of this limited identity: breast removal, breast binding, wearing “frog bras,” using devices that allow them to pee standing up, and dressing like men, etc. Then, as far as I am concerned, we come to the punch line: “Still, every London gay party you go to these days is filled with lesbians having babies (yawn), or lesbians turning straight, if the men are rich enough (yawn). Sinking the gender boat would at least be an interesting new pastime for British lesbians who don’t want to do either of the above and are looking for a new focus. After all, the idea of identity flux, of being able to be whoever you want, is an essential part of the times we are living in.”

Yes, quite. Why? Obviously, because limited identities fail to address the fact that our true identity is limitless. Trying to cram the vastness of one’s self into such tiny containers is painful. The solution suggested by the boy poseurs, that taking refuge in an opposite identity will somehow cancel out one’s former identity, is understandable, if somewhat unscientific. If I assert one identity to cancel another, what do I do with the second identity once the first is canceled? If I get rid of it, I am faced with the prospect of returning to where I started. Why? Because, the ostensible reason for making this change in oneself is to challenge the limited identities that others project on us. If the purpose were solely to change one’s own view of oneself, there would be no need to perform the outer disciplines designed to erase one’s identity. One would simply change the way one thinks about oneself – which, at least in the case of Dean, seems to have already been done – and be happy with who one thought one was. While I would argue that “who he really is” is not “complicated,” “he” is clear that his identity is too big to comfortably rest in the shade of a gender category. But the confidence to refuse the identity projections of others is a very rare quality, so we feel the need to continually attempt to educate the world about who we are. Youth is not known as a period of foresight so the boy poseurs are eventually going to have to confront the fact that once they have removed the breast bindings and men’s clothing, the world, heaven forbid, is going to go right back to seeing them as “shes.”

I went through this identity crisis when I was in my twenties. I grew up in the forties and fifties – which were not periods of introspection – and, at the age of twenty-five thought of myself (insofar as I thought of myself at all) as I really was, “a straight (in those days it meant ‘someone who has not used drugs’), white, Anglo-Saxon businessman.” LSD changed all that. Within a year I was a “turned-on hippie,” or a “head” – meaning a stoner – and I looked down on my former identity as a “plastic person” with contempt. A few years later I realized that “hippie” was merely a

reaction to the limitations of being “straight,” that it was not a transcendent category because it shared the same existential level with “hippie” and merely saddled me with a different set of limitations.

For better or worse, you are what you think you are – and anything you can think about yourself will necessarily be limited. One could argue that the only solution would be to accept the limitations imposed by one’s concept of oneself, but there is another way – investigation.

India’s ancient texts on the subject of the self, the *Upanishads*, contradict the view that only limited identities are available to us. They categorically state that our true identity is universal. “*Aham brahmasmi*” is a *mantra*, called a *mahavakya*, a “great proclamation” that sits at the very ontological heart of Vedic culture. It means “the ‘I,’ the self, is limitless.” That this is not obvious to most of us is obvious. However, many people have investigated the “I” and discovered that it is not merely an idea, nor is it “complicated” as Dean believes, but it is a partless whole.

Identity is not, as we have come to believe, necessarily specific to our bodies and minds and the roles they play. There is a simple something that is much more essentially “us” than any of these things – our consciousness, our intelligence, the light, some say “spirit” – that illumines the body and the mind. It is not something one necessarily discovers by merely reacting to the limitations that society’s limited identities impose. However, suffering limitation sometimes causes one to think about who one actually is. And when this kind of thinking becomes rigorous and allows itself to be shaped by the time-tested body of teachings on the subject of the “I” it can lead to the freedom from limitation that Vedic culture calls enlightenment or “*moksa*.” It will probably be some time before the boy poseurs strip off their breast bindings and abandon their soft-pack dildos in favor of the hair shirt and the mediation cushion, but they are definitely thinking in the right direction.