

What Is Advaita Vedanta?

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Enlightenment through Understanding Western spirituality in the last one hundred and fifty years has seen many expressions of the impulse to experience and know something 'higher' - from the late Victorian New Thought movements through the recent New Age with its plethora of quasi-spiritual subcultures. About thirty-five years ago during the psychedelic revolution in America when traditional religious and social structures were breaking down a migration of export gurus and lamas from India and Buddhist countries imported a raft of metaphysical concepts intended to provide a generation of questioning adults with answers about the meaning of life.

Predictably none of the ideas and practices that arrived from the East survived the contact with Western culture in their original form, not that the form in which they arrived was particularly 'original,' although they seemed quite ancient and authentic to Westerners easily awed by the exotic. Indeed many were hybrids of earlier and purer traditions that had already been corrupted in their native habitats. Two related but separate traditions, Yoga and Vedanta, arrived already corrupted.

Both claim to be 'liberation' philosophies, equally able to free the soul from the suffering that is the hallmark of life in an uncertain world. Both are rooted in the Upanishads, the oldest most authoritative extant texts on the nature the cosmos, the individual, and the Divine.

Yoga promises an experience of oneness of the individual soul with God. To gain this experience certain practices are required which vary depending on the person prescribing them.

Vedanta contends that human beings find themselves limited in many ways and continually strive to rid themselves of limitation. People pursue wealth, pleasure, and merit because they believe it will free them from all manner of physical, temporal and psychological problems. Vedanta presents freedom from limitation as the most desirable goal of human life.

The Upanishads, the source of Vedanta, say that before this creation was, the self, limitless being, was. It further says that this self continues to exist outside of time and is therefore eternal. And it states that no action one can perform will 'gain' this self, even though it is an ever-present reality. . . because actions are limited while the self is unlimited. Therefore it is at odds with Yoga on this issue. The discovery that one is the limitless self is presented as liberation or enlightenment by Vedanta.

Experience of the Self is Not Enlightenment One of the erroneous notions about Vedanta, which came about through a confusion of its teaching with the doctrines of Yoga, is the idea that Vedanta is a way to experience the self. Vedanta contends that ours is a non-dual reality in which everything that exists is the self, including everything that seems to be 'not me,' meaning everything experienceable. If this is true then any and all experience is already the self. From this standpoint the Yoga doctrine that one needs to engage in certain practices like arresting the thoughts to produce a 'self' experience or

'enter the state of the self' is unnecessary and, in fact, redundant. The problem,

according to Vedanta, is not that discrete experiences of oneness are available or unavailable but that the individual does not know that he or she is already the self. . . and as mentioned, that whatever experience is happening is the self. So the problem can only be solved by knowing what the self is. . . and knowing that I am it.

Finally, if this is a non-dual reality and enlightenment is the experience of oneness with the self, how does one explain the existence of the experiencer since experience requires an experiencer and an object of experience. . . an obviously dualistic condition? The self is not going to be experiencing itself because it is itself. Or if it is, it does not need an agent, were an agent capable of experiencing it. . . which puts paid to the very idea of self experience as an experience unique from any other. The only other candidate for the position is the ego, the individual, and Vedanta says that if it exists it is the self already. . . so its desire to experience itself is merely the product of ignorance. . . and can be profitably dismissed.

We cannot dismiss the Yoga view completely because untold millions of truthful persons have 'experienced' the self over tens of thousands of years so we need to look for a reasonable explanation for this phenomenon. One possible explanation lies in the imprecise use of language. It may be that 'the experience of the self' is actually a shift from the individual's point of view to the self's. . . in which case it would be more accurate to say that the self experiences the ego, which is how it actually is. Because the shift is so subtle and language evolved in the experiential world, it is ill equipped to describe this shift accurately so it is forced to formulate the new vision in terms of an ego's experience of an object.

Another reasonable explanation for the idea of self experience as liberation is the situation where the ego, the subject, experiences the reflection of the self in a clear mind, the object, and takes the reflection of the self for the self. . . and declares this experience liberation. The problem with the idea of enlightenment as self experience is that experience changes. . . so there will be no 'permanent experience.' This accounts for the 'fallen yogi' phenomenon where the experience of the self disappears and with it the notion that one is one with the Self. Or, worse. . . the experience disappears but the notion that one is the self is retained leaving a very unhappy person since the 'experience of the self' is pure pleasure.

Vedanta is Not a School of Thought A second and related misconception is that Vedanta is merely an 'intellectual' appreciation of the Self, not a deep and abiding experience as is promised by the samadhis of Yoga and many modern gurus. According to Vedanta any deep and abiding experience would naturally be the Self but so would a superficial and transitory experience. Why? Because in a non-dual reality. . . which this certainly is. . . any and all experience could only be the Self experiencing the Self. When I brush my teeth it is the Self (apparently) brushing the Self. I say, 'apparent' because all experience is apparent, the conspiracy between an apparent subject and an apparent object. It could only be apparent because the Self is non-dual unborn consciousness and everything is it. . . so there is not actually anything going on at all. Or as Vedanta says, "Nothing ever happens." And since Vedanta says that there are not two selves. . . one ego or 'lower' self and one egoless or 'higher' self, but only one self with apparent ignorance or apparent knowledge of what it is. . . the idea that an ego, an individual, can somehow 'experience the non-dual Self' as a discrete experience is plainly incorrect.

The misunderstanding here lies in the idea that there are two kinds of knowledge: experiential (no knowledge) and intellectual. But actually, since all knowledge takes place in the intellect, including the absence of knowledge, both knowledge and

ignorance are only going to be 'intellectual.' The 'I' is never interested in knowledge or no-knowledge since it is the illuminator of both. . . and therefore free of both. Furthermore, if the Self were an experience and the problem of Self recognition was due to ignorance of the nature of the Self as Vedanta contends, how could an experience erase the ignorance. . . except temporarily as happens in various fleeting samadhis and epiphanies? And experience, no matter how 'non-dual' it is (and how long it goes on), does not erase thought patterns. . . as evidenced by the fact literally millions of people who have 'experienced' non-duality continue to think of themselves as limited beings when the experience wears off. If the experience of non-duality were the solution to the spiritual search no one who had had it would continue to search for 'permanent' or 'total' enlightenment. The spiritual world today is little more than tens of thousands of people who have experienced the Self but who remain locked in their concepts of who they are.

However, analysis of experience, shallow or deep, leading to the discovery that any and all experience is nothing but one's Self, could remove the 'intellectual' notion that experience was superior to knowledge. After all, someone who strives for the experience of oneness does so because he or she holds an 'intellectual' conviction that experience is the only path to enlightenment. If he or she is going to dismiss the very reasonable idea that you can only get what you already have through understanding that you have it, he or she will have to dismiss as merely 'intellectual' the much more unreasonable notion that the Self is only available through a particular non-dual experience.

In fact, Vedanta has no quarrel with experience. Experience is a universal experience. And the 'experience of non-duality' gives a glimpse of the Self which can be an aid to understanding. Vedanta merely says that experience as such is unconscious, incapable of delivering knowledge. For knowledge to happen whether it is based on experience or inference there must be a conscious factor other than experience that recognizes experience for what it is. This is why enlightenment is not a permanent experience of the Self but is instead the 'experiential' (as opposed to 'theoretical') understanding that one is the Self.

Another corruption of Vedanta exported to the West is the idea that Vedanta is a philosophy or school of thought. A school of thought is always the ideas of a given person or persons and is therefore subject to dispute. If an idea is to be accepted as a fact, not merely a belief or an opinion, it needs to be verified by a legitimate means of knowledge. But the subject matter of Vedanta, the Self, is not available by direct perception or inference since it is outside time and space, the field in which the senses and mind operate. And because human beings only have three means of knowledge (perception, inference and testimony) and these can only be used to know objects, how can the Self, the subject (which cannot be objectified) and the one who is wielding the means of knowledge, be known through them? So the subject matter of Vedanta, the Self, cannot be a school of thought.

Vedanta looks like a school of thought, however, because it is comprised of a body of ideas that originated in the Vedas. People to whom the Self had never been revealed through the teachings of Vedanta assumed that it was just another philosophy and attributed differing interpretations to different teachers and so it became several schools of thought. . . for them. Had these people understood that Vedanta was simply a means for knowing the Self, this misconception would not have arisen.

A means of knowledge is not knowledge. It will not remain once the object to be

known is known. So study of its ideas and the retention of them as beliefs or opinions is not appropriate to the actual purpose of Vedanta. Philosophies like existentialism, on the other hand, are subject to modification and remain in the realm of ideas as long as they serve some purpose. Vedanta, a means of knowledge that works, will never be modified because it already performs its function perfectly. Nor will it be forgotten because the human mind forever needs to rid itself of its sense of limitation.

There is No Advaita Vedanta The words Advaita Vedanta, like the word Hinduism, are a misnomer because they imply other Vedantas. The word 'Advaita' means non-dual and implies the concept of duality. Indeed, those who view Vedanta as a school of thought speak of *Dwaita* Vedanta, dualistic Vedanta, VishistAdvaita Vedanta, qualified non-dualism, and even *Bhakti* Vedanta, devotional Vedanta. Or they compare it with philosophies or religions that present similar ideas.

The word 'Advaita' is not an adjective meant to modify a particular type of Vedanta but a word that describes the nature of the Self. Keeping in mind that words are always symbols, although non-dual implies dual, it is more appropriate to refer to the Self as non-dual than as one since one is a number that implies two, many, and even zero, nothing. Furthermore, it would be inappropriate to label Vedanta, which is merely a means of knowledge, as non-dual because it is in fact a dualistic device operating in a dualistic situation, one that ironically delivers non-dual knowledge.

The ultimate source of Vedanta's teachings are the Upanishads, documents appended to the concluding portion of each Veda. In fact the word Vedanta is a compound. Veda means knowledge and *anta* means end. On an exoteric level the term indicates the Upanishads, the texts containing its seed teachings, because they are situated at the end of each Veda. On the esoteric level, it means the non-dual knowledge that ends the belief in oneself as a limited being. Because of the cryptic nature of the Upanishad mantras, the subtle nature of the subject matter, the Self, and the fact that a single Sanskrit word often has many possible meanings, it is possible to interpret the statements of the Upanishad differently. Over the course of time there have been a number of great teachers of Vedanta who interpreted the statements of the Upanishads in different ways. But this does not amount to different schools of thought because all of them accepted Vedanta as a means of Self knowledge.

Although Vedanta is often erroneously accused of being an intellectual discipline, it operates differently from them because it does not leave concepts behind in the mind once it has been handled by a teacher. It uses concepts to destroy false concepts about the nature of the Self. And in the process both the correct idea and the erroneous idea disappear into the vision of oneself as the Self. Since the emphasis is on removal of doubt, any interpretation of a mantra can be applied to remove the doubt, irrespective of other interpretations. For a given person one interpretation may be appropriate while the same interpretation may be inappropriate for another because he or she entertains a different doubt or formulates the doubt in a different way. Irrespective of the interpretation, Vedanta acts as a means of knowledge if it removes one's ignorance of one's limitless nature.

If I want to see an object I need only use my eyes. If my ears do not hear the object while my eyes are seeing it their testimony does not invalidate what my eyes see. If I want to gain the knowledge of my Self I need to dispassionately expose myself to the teachings of Vedanta to see whether or not what it says is true. Because they are concerned with a different reality, perceptions and inferences about things in the

world do not in any way invalidate the vision of Vedanta.

You are That The vision of Vedanta is an equation of the identity between the individual and God. God is defined in Vedanta as everything that is. This vision of non-duality, which Yoga claims to achieve through certain disciplines, is not contradicted by direct perception or by inference. Although it is erroneously believed that the self can be experienced, it cannot. Why? Because the experiencing instrument, the ego/mind, can only know objects. What yogis claim to be a direct perception or experience of the self is the ego seeing the reflection of the Self in a pure mind and not the self, since the Self is subtler than the mind and ego.

Vedanta is not a salvation theology that requires an individual to change. According to it, the soul, the individual is perfect and already free. So the release of the individual from his or her feeling of limitation is the result of understanding that the individual and God share the same nature, limitless awareness. All the other teachings of Vedanta are only meant to prove this equation between man and God. Or, as a great mystic who seemed to have the vision of Vedanta once proclaimed, "I and my Father are one." The 'God' Vedanta envisions is not a bearded old man in the heavens.

The heart of Vedanta is a number of teaching methods, called prakriyas, found in the Upanishads and used by the teachers of the tradition to communicate the vision of non-duality. If a system of philosophy is built up out of these teachings it defeats the purpose of Vedanta.

Vedanta does not try to prove that the self exists because the only self evident self existent thing in reality is oneself. Everything that is known is known only because the self, the I, is self-evident awareness. Vedanta concentrates only on removing the ignorance that keeps one from appreciating oneself as self-evident awareness. Self knowledge is the most valuable knowledge one can gain because it shows that while everything depends on you, you depend on nothing. This realization is called liberation.