

Why Vedanta Is the Best Path

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In my last blog I said that Vedanta is not a path. It is a means of self-knowledge. No action is involved when a means of knowledge is operating. If the ears are listening, sounds are known. If the eyes are open, sights are seen. If a qualified mind is present and the methodology of Vedanta is wielded by a qualified teacher, self-knowledge happens. Nothing can be done about it. A path, on the other hand, is a series of actions that may or may not lead to the intended destination. In the case of a path, the destination is always something other than the one who is walking the path. In the spiritual world the end of the path, including the way stations, is usually conceived of as some kind of mystical experience or eternal experiential bliss.

Vedanta is based on the idea that reality is non-dual, so there is no actual separation between the one striving for enlightenment and the enlightenment for which he or she is striving. If enlightenment is the nature of the self then nothing can be done to achieve it. The only solution is the removal of one's ignorance about one's nature. Therefore knowledge, not action, is appropriate.

But Vedanta could also be seen as a path because the conditions necessary for a means of self-knowledge to operate are not always present. If someone wants self-knowledge, i.e. freedom, then he or she is going to have to put forth certain actions to create the conditions that make self-knowledge possible. He or she is going to have to prepare the mind for enlightenment. On experiential paths the idea is to do actions that will generate certain experiences. But while the path of Vedanta encourages a particular action, inquiry, this action has a different result: knowledge. It is true that knowledge can change one's experience radically, but the experiential shift is a by-product of the knowledge, not the purpose of the knowledge. Knowledge only removes ignorance. This does not seem to be a big deal. However, it turns out that in the case of self-knowledge, one's whole life is transformed when one no longer sees one's self from a limited perspective. This is not a mind-blowing mystical transformation resulting in a permanent spiritual orgasm – as enlightenment is often touted. It is just a practical reorientation of one's life around a simple principle – non-duality – as the bad values and the priorities that flow from a limited self-understanding dissolve in the wake of the knowledge of the self.

Inquiry is a *karma*, an action. It is an act of mind. It is sometimes argued that self-inquiry is not something that one does. It is rather something that is going on all the time and only rises to the level of the conscious mind at a particular time in one's evolution. The human mind is always curious. It is always looking for answers because life is uncertain. One never knows what will happen. In worldly people the need to understand is centered on worldly topics: security, pleasure, virtue, love, power, recognition, etc. But for undetermined reasons the desire to know in certain people is centered on the self. When one takes conscious control of this process one is said to be a seeker of self-knowledge. And if one is a seeker of self-knowledge – which is a much more reasonable goal than mystical experience, no path can compete with Vedanta.

This claim will, of course, raise an outcry because everyone believes that the path they are following is the best. It may be the best for them at the time, considering their qualifications, but what you think is best for you is not always best. It is for lack

of understanding that there is something better than one sticks to an inferior path. At the expense of incurring the wrath of seekers following other paths, the idea that Vedanta is the best path, again assuming certain qualifications, is not an idle claim and I will try to back it up. I know very well that I am bucking conventional non-dual wisdom – which, like conventional wisdom everywhere, is often not wisdom at all. Conventional contemporary non-dual wisdom is locked in the spiritually-correct view that any kind of judgment or criticism is ego or “duality” and therefore simply prejudice or dogmatism and is to be shunned.

As I pointed out in my last blog, I do not care if anyone likes me and I am not an ambitious *guru* out to save the world so, sustained by my love of truth, I can afford to think critically. Critical thinking is not “dualistic” or ego-oriented. In fact, it is absolutely necessary when ignorance prevails, as it does always and particularly in the modern spiritual world which is little more than potpourri of vague and confusing ideas.

The problem is compounded by the fact that we live in an apparently democratic age. Democracy as we know it is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of human social organization. It is based on a spiritual principle: non-duality. The idea is that we are all equal and should be treated equally. It is a lovely idea but proves to be somewhat difficult to implement insofar as most humans are unaware of the non-dual nature of reality. Not only is the world unaware of this fact now, it has been unaware of this fact forever. Considering that everyone is born in different circumstances at different times, and considering the belief that each of us believes we are unique and special, we have in the course of evolution evolved into a very diverse species. You may or may not like the idea of diversity but it is here to stay.

Although I attacked the idea of evolution in a recent blog as an impediment to liberation and as a justification for evolving new spiritual institutions, it is an apparent fact within the apparent creation. Without diving into a complex analysis, it is sufficient to say that a vast pool of talents and proclivities obtains in the world. Some individuals are more intelligent than others. Some are more loving than others. Some more powerful, more famous, more mature than others, more “evolved” than others. My teacher was a master of communication and his teachings were punctuated with dramatic, humorous and provocative examples. Always with tongue in cheek he described human evolution as a continuum on which “stone” men occupied the lowest rung, followed by “plant” men, “animal” men, “men” men and “god” men. Let’s be kind and include spiritual questers, people looking for the meaning of life through spirituality, in the last category. But even among the spiritual crowd, which apparently sits on the highest evolutionary rung, a definite hierarchy prevails. Some, fresh off tragedies of their own making or attracted by a popular alternative lifestyle, are just beginning their seeking and know very little. Some more sophisticated individuals who have been at it for a considerable period know more and some very “ripe” or “old” souls know a lot. A slight jiggle of the branch and they will fall off the tree of life and plop on the ground of being.

One Size Does Not Fit All

One reason Vedanta is superior to other paths is because it recognizes the inherently diverse and unequal nature of human beings. It is more honest because it knows just how difficult inquiry is and insists that individuals be qualified for it. The qualifications that Vedanta requires amount to existential maturity. It requires a discriminating, dispassionate, clear-minded, devoted, properly motivated individual

capable of suspending his or her beliefs and opinions long enough to hear and realize the truth. This does not, as so many claim, make Vedanta an elitist path. On the contrary, it is a sign of great compassion insofar as we will not unnecessarily frustrate people who are not ready to assimilate the knowledge “I am non-dual, actionless, ordinary awareness.”

One might reasonably question the claim that paths that accept anybody and allow them to believe that action and experience will set them free are actually serving the interests of those seeking freedom. Inferior paths are paths that do not question their own assumptions. For example, the idea that enlightenment is some kind of experience depends on the notion that reality is a duality and that the individual is not experiencing the self all the time. But reality is non-dual, so the fundamental assumption of experiential paths is incorrect. A path that insists that an individual try to experience what he or she is experiencing all the time is a valid path?

It never seems to dawn on the proponents of other paths that the reason there are so many seekers and so few finders is a direct consequence of the qualifications issue. If you need to be prepared for enlightenment, then you need to have a means to prepare yourself. Neo-Advaita, which attracts many, has no such means. It dismisses all means, except itself. It is not actually a valid means because it has no methodology except mindless denial of the apparent reality. It never ceases to amaze me that its proponents can claim that seekers do not exist, yet address those very same seekers as if they did.

It is possible to gain the qualifications with or without a spiritual path. But the *karma*-based paths fall short because they do not have a proven methodology for removing ignorance. Instead, they rely on an individual's interpretation of his or her mystic experience, which will inevitably be skewed, ignorance being what it is. Even if the seeker's experiences are seen in light of the path's prevailing wisdom, it is usually not enough because no other path, apart from Vedanta, is a complete and proven means of self-knowledge. Vedanta does not deny experience, nor does it glorify it. It examines the whole question of knowledge and experience and makes it completely clear in what ways they are different and in what way they are the same. You cannot beat the clarity of Vedanta.

Vedanta also, on the other hand, supplies the seeker with a complete and sophisticated kit of transformational tools suitable for preparing the mind for enlightenment: *karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *jnana yoga*, *triguna vibhava yoga* and meditation.

There Is Only One Path

Vedanta is superior to other paths because there is only one path. The modern spiritual world, God bless its pointed little head, is mightily in love with the idea that all roads lead to Rome. But there is only one road to Rome. Why? Because, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there is only one self and there is only one human being. This is the meaning of non-duality. Other paths accept the view that we are all unique individuals and therefore require means appropriate to our uniqueness. But there is only one self and there is only one human being. So only one path is necessary.

What is this human being? It is awareness with a causal, subtle and gross body. Enlightenment is the discrimination between the self and the three bodies. Suffering

is caused by taking the subtle body, where self-knowledge (enlightenment) takes place, and which the self under the spell of maya takes to be the "I" when it is only a reflection. It is an honest error: the subtle body seems to be conscious because the self pervades it completely. This confusion is analogous to thinking that the moon has its own light. What path, other than Vedanta, identifies the fundamental structure of the human being and carefully reveals its relationship to the totality of existence? Enlightenment is the knowledge of both *sattya*, pure awareness, and *mithya*, reflected awareness, and the relationship between the two. Without knowledge of *mithya* how will a human being live free in the apparent reality? He or she is already the self whether it is known or not. Enlightenment is complete self-knowledge. To say that the apparent reality does not exist – as the Neos claim – is ridiculous because we cannot experience something that does not exist. To be sure, it is not real but it definitely exists.

Reality is a cosmos, not a happenstance, random series of meaningless events. It is a perfectly structured, precisely functioning organism, awareness shining on itself in the form of insentient gross and subtle matter vestures.

The diagram at the bottom of this blog shows the structure of existence in its macrocosmic and microcosmic aspects. It is a picture of every human being and the field in which that human works out its *karma*. This *mandala* of being – the twenty-four cosmic principles or *tattvas* – is not just a static snapshot but is brought alive by Vedanta's simple yet highly sophisticated teachings. When this *mandala* is unfolded by a qualified teacher on a qualified mind, it is virtually impossible for self-knowledge not to take place.

Go with What Works

The Vedanta *sampradaya*, the lineage, is the most successful path in the history of human spirituality because it works. Even Buddhism, a derivative path that claims to be a liberation philosophy, is merely a chip off the tooth of the *Vedas*. I meet many Western Buddhists every year and I am always astounded to hear that in spite of many years of practice, sometimes as many as twenty, none seem to have an idea of what the self is. Nor do they know that hard and fast self-knowledge is enlightenment even though the word "Buddha" comes from a Sanskrit word meaning "to know."

Most of what passes for a path these days – and indeed, more or less forever – is the mystic experience of various individuals. What kind of path do the epiphanies of specific individuals amount to? They amount to remembered knowledge, nothing more. Vedanta calls this kind of knowledge *smirti*. Sometimes the knowledge you extract from your experience corresponds to the truth and sometimes it doesn't. For example, Baba Muktananda said he experienced a "blue pearl" before he attained his putative enlightenment. And in his "lineage," which is not a proper lineage, Siddha Yogis, which, little wonder, seem to be a dying breed, believe that this experience is necessary on the path of Siddha Yoga. In fact, no discrete experience is required for enlightenment, only a mature mind. If you look at the many modern spiritual movements that purport to be means of enlightenment – J. Krishnamurti, Transcendental Meditation and Osho, for example – you see happenings – at best, you see therapies – but you do not see a valid path to enlightenment. As soon as the founder dies, seekers run elsewhere looking for another path. If you understand what Vedanta is, you will never seek another path because it is knowledge-based and you can count on knowledge. It does not rely on the experience of an individual.

The people who walk away from Vedanta do so because either they are not qualified, have the wrong idea of what Vedanta is meant to do or were taught by unqualified teachers.

This is not to say that odd individuals do not occasionally realize their true nature through other paths or from teachers who do not teach Vedanta. If in fact modern teachers claiming enlightenment are actually enlightened, most have never heard of Vedanta or if they have they have no idea what it actually is because they have never subjected themselves to the *sampradaya*. Anyone with a burning desire and the requisite qualifications who sincerely adheres to the words of scripture can gain enlightenment. And occasionally some even realize the self without the aid of a teacher and a teaching altogether. It stands to reason because self-realization is the self realizing itself. The self is ever-free and when it discovers that it is apparently caught up in the web of *maya* it will not rest until it has re-discovered itself irrespective of time, place and circumstances. However, it is wise not to treat one's self as the exception to the rule. Although there are no actual figures, it is probably accurate to say that 99% of enlightened beings did so with the help of a teaching and a teacher. My only argument is that, given the necessity of a proven path and a qualified teacher – and enlightenment in no way qualifies you to “teach” it – Vedanta is superior to every other path.

You Need a Methodology

You not only need methods to transform your mind to prepare it for enlightenment, you need a comprehensive methodology to teach self-knowledge because self-ignorance is hardwired. If you have been thinking of yourself as a limited, inadequate, incomplete, separate being since the day you popped out of the womb, the pathetic affirmations of yourself as consciousness and mindless denials of your apparent self, encouraged by Neo-Advaita, amount to a serious frustration, not a helpful teaching. In fact, Neo-Advaita is very much an anti-religion religion insofar as without proven means to validate its claims, the seeker is reduced to the status of a believer. Even if you “get it” once, you will un-get it later unless your mind is properly cultivated. And if any action amounts to “ego” – which is a cooked-up villain by most modern teachings, rather like the Devil in Christianity – you will not have cultivated the kind of mind that is capable of getting and retaining this elusive knowledge. Vedanta does not ask you to kill or deny the ego, the self with its three bodies, because the ego is the self under the spell of apparent ignorance. Instead, it shows the ego how to prepare itself for inquiry, how to inquire into its own nature and how to remove its own ignorance.

Terminology, Not Lingo

Any spiritual path, including Vedanta, is nothing but words. There are words and there are words. For knowledge to happen both the speaker and the listener need to know the meaning of the words they use. If an oak tree is present but you do not know what it is and I point to it and say the words “oak tree,” knowledge takes place. But if I say “*karma*,” “the mind,” “the self,” “ego,” “*nirvana*” or “inquiry,” what do these words refer to?

If you look at the many books, websites and videos that talk about enlightenment you will become hopelessly confused because everyone uses words in an idiosyncratic way. There is no established terminology. Every path has its own

incestuous lingo which is never critically examined and burnished to remove vagueness and contradictory terms. Vedanta, on the other hand, has an established terminology. You need an established terminology with rigid definitions if the teacher and the taught are going to stay on the same page during the teaching. Vedanta is not a one-way transmission. It is a communication between a teacher and a student that models the inquiry that needs to eventually be carried on between the seeker, who is the self under the spell of ignorance, and his own mind. This terminology is established in a work by Shankaracharya called *Tattva Bodh (Knowledge of Truth)*. It gives precise definitions for all the basic ideas.

A Multidimensional Universal Teaching

The experience of an individual and the way he or she interprets said experience will by definition be limited and idiosyncratic. Only a seeker who resonates personally with an enlightened person will have the patience to translate the teacher's words into intelligible and helpful statements. Most people who come to Vedanta have been to many teachers and teachings. From each one they have picked up something useful but – and I hear this all the time – Vedanta “connects the dots.” It can do this because it is the essence of the experience of hundreds of thousands of enlightened beings. It is a complete science presented in an impersonal way. When you rely on the words of one person, it is very easy to doubt those words. But when you understand that Vedanta is “*apurusheyajnanam*” – not from an individual human intellect – it carries much more weight. You can always argue with an individual but how can you argue with scripture?

To say that Vedanta is the best path is not to say that any other path is worthless. Nothing in reality is worthless and consciousness leads seekers to the path that is appropriate to their level of qualification. So it is all good. But given the facts, Vedanta is the best. If you want to see why I make this claim apart from the arguments in this blog, please read my book *How to Attain Enlightenment*. It presents the whole teaching in a way that is easily accessible to the Western mind. You will be convinced.