

# Vedanta, India and the West

Ram (James Swartz)

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Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/89>

**Selvi:** Dear James, I hope this email finds you in good health and prospering. I have been enjoying reading the material on your site. It is so rich, and the sophisticated teachings of Vedanta are articulated with a beautiful simplicity. Thank you, again, for making this material so openly available to many seekers.

There was one thing which I saw recently which troubled me because it is so unlike you to have factually incorrect statements pertaining to Vedanta on your website. There is an observation by Sundari, in an e-satsang with Hannah (titled *Seeker or Finder?*), that Vedanta is not based on Eastern tradition, and has nothing to do with it really, even though the *Vedas* originate in the East.

It is true, of course, that what Vedanta points to is the universal Truth, found everywhere, and is everyone's true nature. The subject of what Vedanta teaches, the Self, is neither Eastern nor Western, neither Hindu nor Christian, etc. However, Vedanta, the means of knowledge, is quintessentially Indian. It originated in India, was revealed to those that lived in India, and as you yourself have so often pointed out, has been nurtured in India for centuries. It is India's most important and most beautiful offering to the world, an offering initiated by Swami Chinmayananda and taken forward by people like yourself.

I went to the Chinmaya Mission to check the facts, and they assured me that Vedanta has its roots in India and nowhere else.

Vedanta, the means of knowledge, is not only Indian, it is quintessentially Hindu (contrary to Annette Nibley's statement on her website). The *Upanishads* and the *Brahma Sutras* are Hindu, the *Bhagavad Gita* and Krishna are the very heart of Hinduism.

All the *gurus* and *jnanis* that you invoke, from Narayana through to Karamanye, are Indian and Hindu, and Shankaracharya took Hinduism to its very zenith.

The Self is free from all religion and nationality, as is the *jnani*. Yet the associations and the context of the *jivas* that honed Vedantic thought are undeniably Hindu and Indian.

As you have shown, Vedanta can be taught anywhere, in a modern way, minus much of the Sanskrit terminology, for the convenience of the students of today, whether Eastern or Western. Certainly, the knowledge is timeless and has universal validity. Its Hindu and Indian origins surely do not diminish Vedanta in the eyes of the West.

Why should we not give credit where it is due and acknowledge India, where you came to seek and where you found what you sought, India, which you considered your home for decades, from where all the knowledge is drawn which you now lay before the world. What do you think?

~ Best regards, Selvi

**James:** Hi Selvi, lovely to hear from you. I'm sorry Sundari's and Annette's statements bothered you. I am unable to read everything that is posted on the website and had I read them I would have asked that they be restated. It seems to me that both statements – yours and Sundari's are true – such is the paradoxical nature of reality. As you say, it is true, of course, that what Vedanta points to is the universal Truth, found everywhere, and is everyone's true nature. The subject of what Vedanta teaches, the Self, is neither Eastern nor Western, neither Hindu nor Christian, etc.

The word "Vedanta" has two meanings: (1) the knowledge that ends the quest for knowledge and (2) the means whereby that knowledge is gained. The first meaning, as you know, is limitless consciousness, which is obviously not associated with any cultural group. The second is definitely associated with India, although India per se is not mentioned in the source texts. It is known as Bharat, the Land of Light, i.e. consciousness, which again is a spiritual, not a physical, location. And in fact, what is known as Hinduism is actually the *Sanatana Dharma* or *Purna Vidya* which appeared before India was India.

Having said that, from the normal viewpoint I could not agree with you more. And I have never been shy about expressing my love and gratitude for India and its people. Your *bhakti* for India touched me deeply. I spoke with Sundari yesterday and she understands the two meanings but did not express herself very clearly. I will have the webmaster take down her *satsang* and we will rewrite it to make her statement more accurate. I will forward my reply to you to Annette as well.

When I write and teach I always make the origin of the means of knowledge known. However, to make this great knowledge available to Western people who don't have Indian *samskaras* I have been forced to disassociate Vedanta from its cultural trappings in some measure, sad to say. Many Western people have difficulty separating the knowledge from the means, at least not until they have been properly taught. They see the orange clothing, the long hair and beards, the beads, the accented English, etc. and they have a hard time relating. A few with *purva janma samskaras* acquired in India have no problem with Vedanta's association with Hinduism and India. Swami Chinmaya and Swami Dayananda were very successful bringing Vedanta to ex-patriot Indians in America but Vedanta never really took with Westerners until I came along because the means of knowledge – which is just logic and common sense – can be wielded in any cultural and linguistic context. In fact, I was encouraged by Swami Chinmaya, who told me forty-three years ago that Vedanta would thrive in the West at the beginning of this century, to adapt it to Western culture. A lot of people thought that Chinmaya was doing Vedanta a disservice when he decided to teach in English and not in Hindi or Malayalam or Tamil. The disentanglement of Vedanta from India started with Vivekananda. Chinmaya, who was a Hindu of the best caliber, continued it and Dayananda, another great Hindu, continued it further. His publications are very well anglicized.

It is a little sad in a way, but it is inevitable. It will always work in India in an Indian format and it will never be disassociated from Sanskrit – there are some words that just don't work in other languages – but it works here without the Hindu trappings largely thanks to me and the people I have taught. It is also interesting to note that certain Hindu Indians appreciate the way I teach it to the way the *swamis* teach it. A lot of Indians, as you probably know, incorrectly associate pure Vedanta with Hinduism and by extension with many of the superstitious and irrational practices of uninformed Hinduism. I love Vedanta and we chant and do our *puja* to Krishna every

day, not to mention study of the texts. In any case, Selvi, these are my thoughts on the topic. I am so happy that Vedanta has served you so well. Take care of yourself.

~ Much love, James