

What do we mean by Vedanta and how can it be practiced in daily life? The term “Vedanta” is derived from “Vedas,” revelations of Sages and Saints which constitute the earliest source of human wisdom and inspiration. The concluding portions of the Vedas are called the Upanishads, and these great teachings constitute the climax of Vedic thought and the basis of Vedanta philosophy. “Vedanta” literally means “end of the Vedas.”

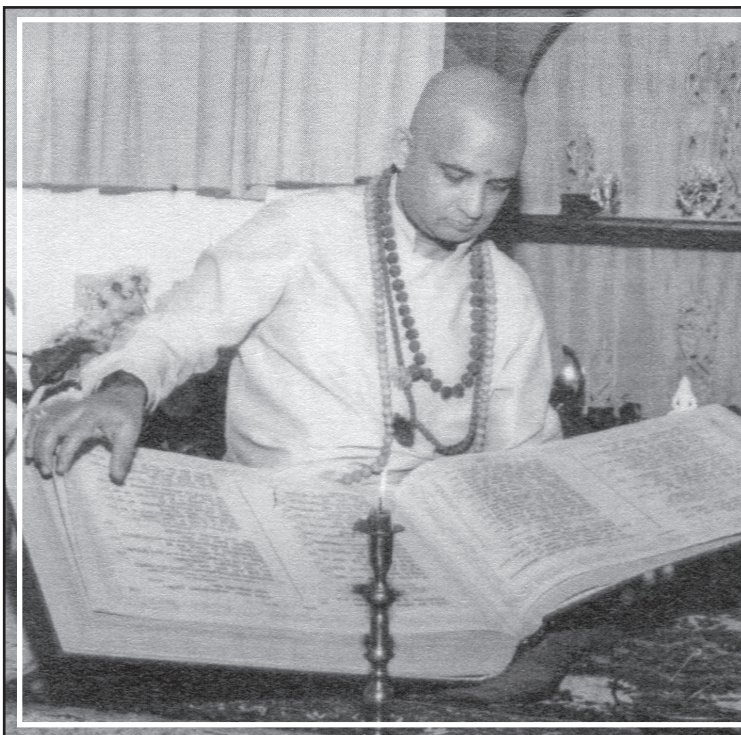
The term “Yoga,” which means “union with God or union with the Divine Self,” can be used synonymously with Vedanta. However, when the terms Yoga and Vedanta are both used, Vedanta may refer to a theoretical understanding, and Yoga to the practical experience. Presently when I speak of Vedanta, I am referring to both the theoretical knowledge as well as to the actual experience of the highest in your life.

Vedanta boldly asserts that it IS possible for you, and every human being, to attain the highest goal of Liberation—freedom from the cycles of birth and death—and that it is pos-

sible for you to attain that goal within your lifetime. That is why you have been born. The very purpose of your existence is to discover that infinite bliss within your heart and put an end to the sorrow and misery that is repeatedly experienced through many embodiments.

One of the Upanishads says that great is the blessing of a person who realizes the Self, who attains Liberation during his lifetime. But great is the calamity of one who does not, because then the soul must face the possibility of coming back into repeated embodiments. No matter which type of embodiment you come into, or how wonderful the family in which you are born, embodiment is a calamity.

Imagine yourself endlessly repeating the experiences of childhood and all the errors and tribulations of growing up. Imagine how miserable it is to be reborn again as a struggling human being in the world of relativity. This process of being born again and again is known as the world-process. Vedanta is that philosophical vision and teaching that enables



VEDANTA IN LIFE

By Swami Jyotirmayananda

PART ONE

you to go beyond the world-process, to attain Enlightenment, and to terminate the cycles of birth and death.

You must further understand that realizing your Self is not a personal goal. The process of realizing the Self will enable you to become increasingly selfless. It is a process of purifying and integrating your personality, and as you integrate yourself more and more, you become a blessing to humanity. Therefore, the movement towards Self-realization is a project to bring about the dissolution of the ego-sense. It is a project of becoming totally selfless.

Speaking of the ideal sage, the Gita says, “*Sarvabhuta Hite Ratah.*” An ideal Sage, one who has attained Enlightenment, engages himself in doing good to all. It is a profound fact that no one can evolve just for himself without benevolently influencing the world around him. All thoughts in your mind—both negative and positive—have their radiation and influence others.

So, attaining Enlightenment is not a selfish project. Rather, it is the project by which you can be most useful to humanity. If the personality is to be put to the best use in serving humanity, then enlightening that personality is the only way to do it. If you were to grasp this fact, then there would arise an immense aspiration within yourself for attaining Self-realization.

Let me illustrate this with a simple parable. There was a fisherman who lived his life in misery. One moonlit night, brooding over the fact that he had not caught sufficient fish, the fisherman sat in his boat, tossing some stones he had found in a bag on his way to the river. But then, having thrown most of them into the river, he looked closely at the last few and saw that they were precious stones. Once he developed that awareness, he made himself rich from the few that were left, and didn't need to fish any more.

Much in the same manner, everyone is a fisherman, fishing for various things and trapping them in the net of subtle desires. In this process there develops imperfection, sorrow and misery. Time passes on and one does not attend to what is most essential. He is always occupied with the three concerns of past, present and future, and thus continues to throw away the wonderful possibilities of his life. Time passes on and the value of life is as if thrown away. But when you realize the precious stones you have—the Divine potentialities of your life—you begin to enrich yourself with Divine virtues until you attain Enlightenment.

No matter when you realize the spiritual value of life, whether late in life or early, you begin to tread the path of blessedness that leads you to the highest—Liberation. Therefore, you must strive to understand the value of life, the value of the time that you have before you. If your time is properly utilized, you can put an end to the cycles of birth and death and attain the highest. That highest attainment is the greatest blessing for yourself and for humanity.

The movement towards Self-realization is the basis of the most advanced culture. If even a handful of the people of a country were Self-realized, that country would become highly prosperous. No one rises in ethical or mystical or spiritual value without his influence being felt in society. Therefore, as you see in the history of India, many Saints and Sages have risen again and again, and a cultural basis has been formed that produces more and more Saints and Sages. Mahatma Gandhi is the most recent example, for he demonstrated that one person's inward unfolding has tremendous influence on the masses.

If we want to solve the great problems that face humanity today—the problems of insecurity, the problems of war, the fear of what will happen when deadly nuclear bombs are let loose—then we must each look for solutions

deep within our heart. It is by purifying our nature that we effectively combat against the forces of falsehood, greed and violence, and thus promote peace in the world. Even in the midst of the clamorous conditions of today, you can develop a different type of experience, because you have within you that source which is universal. You can realize that you are not an individual personality; you are the Divine Self.

That realization is of such great value that if people became truly interested in it, we would see the rule of spiritual power grow in society. That was the dream of Mahatma Gandhi. He always talked about “*Rama rajya*” — “the rule of Lord Rama.” In Hindu tradition, *Rama rajya* is considered the ideal form of government—to be ruled by men who are enlightened.

According to the scriptural story, the great Divine incarnation, Rama, was enlightened; his wife, Sita, was enlightened; his brothers were all enlightened; and his Guru, Sage Vasistha, was enlightened. All of these enlightened people joined together to rule the country. Since men who are enlightened are not selfish, their hearts overflow with compassion and they feel unity

with all. Therefore, how can anything go wrong? Rather, everything that is good and beautiful begins to develop in that type of society.

Having understood the implications of Vedanta—the goal it represents and the fact that that goal can be attained within your life—the project before you now is to follow three guidelines towards its realization. A great philosophical work of Vedanta known as *Yoga Vasistha* speaks of three interrelated methods that are geared to educate the unconscious, integrate the personality and enlighten the intellect. These three are: *tattwa jnana* (knowledge of the Self), *vasana kshaya* (destruction of *vasanas* or subtle desires of the unconscious), and *manonash* (destruction of the conditioned mind).

Tattwa Jnana

The first method of purifying the unconscious is known as *tattwa jnana* (knowledge of the Self). The task before an aspirant is to enlighten the intellect, to understand the true secret of one’s existence. You can be intellectually bright, you can understand the laws of physics, and even have insight into the most complicated secrets of the elements, but yet you may not know the mystery of the Self.

You would be surprised how the most brilliant minds of science—those who can explain the most intricate phenomena of nature—are unable to understand the mind. When it comes to explaining the mind, they blunder, believing that the mind is nothing but an accidental product of matter—a product of the evolutionary process in which molecules organized themselves in an intricate fashion, giving rise to the formation of the brain, of which the mind is merely an outgrowth.

However, people who have attained a certain degree of sensitivity and purity due to their good karmas are able to understand that the mind is

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something different from the brain and nervous system. Your mind carries with it impressions from many lives. The body dies, but the mind survives and projects another body.

Gaining true understanding about the nature of your real Self is the path of knowledge, and it consists of three stages—listening, reflection, and meditation. In the first stage you listen to and read the teachings of the great works of Sages. We are extremely fortunate today that the scriptures written by Sages and Saints are so readily available. The wisdom that has been attained through mystic research and meditation by thousands of Sages and Saints is now at your fingertips. In ancient times those scriptural books were very difficult to obtain and thus it was almost impossible for a person to be introduced to the Upanishads. Now, all the Upanishads are available.

However, listening and reading are subtle arts. You may be listening, but you are really hearing only your own subtle ideas and thoughts. You may be reading, but your attention is somewhere else. The art of listening with true receptivity, therefore, has to be developed.

There is an amusing parable that describes this. There lived two friends, one a farmer and the other a merchant, who had not seen each other for a long time. One day the farmer received news that his merchant friend had become sick and was in the hospital. Since the hospital was close by, the farmer, who by this time had become very old and extremely hard of hearing, thought to visit his friend.

He thought, “It has been such a long time since I last saw my friend. But how will I converse with him? I can no longer hear very well and don’t want to burden him with my deafness.” So he planned within his mind what the conversation would be and what each would say.

He would begin by saying, “Oh friend, how pleased I am to see you! How are you feeling?” He was sure his friend’s reply would be that

he was feeling fine and he was happy, so he planned to say, “Oh, I’m so delighted.” Then I’ll ask, “Which doctor is treating you?” and he will tell me the name of his doctor. I will then say, “That great doctor has a lucky foot. Wherever he goes, disease just vanishes.”

So the farmer planned a series of questions and answers, and went to the hospital to meet his friend. The friend was terribly sick. His condition was deteriorating and he was in great pain. Having entered his friend’s room, the farmer said, “I am very pleased to see you again. How do you feel?” The friend replied that he was feeling dreadful, miserable. “I am so delighted!” the farmer said.

The farmer asked, “Which doctor is treating you?” The patient, who was already annoyed by the first reply, thought within himself, “This friend of mine was really my enemy. He is delighted to see me suffering from pain. I never knew this. It is a revelation to my mind.” So when he was asked which doctor was treating him, in annoyance he said, “Death.” The farmer, already having an answer in his mind, said, “That doctor has a lucky foot. Wherever he goes, he brings blessings.”

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“And what did you have for food?” “Poison.” “Good digestion!” the farmer replied. By this time the merchant had become so angry that he started shrieking and beating his legs and the nurses had to take the farmer away.

The story is exaggerated, but if you study relationships between people, you will find that listening is really very difficult. Most people just speak their minds and do not listen to each other. Everyone has already fabricated certain ideas and concepts, and because of them one is not able to understand others. You may talk to a person for an hour and think you know all about him, and that he understands you. However, when the next day comes, you realize it is not so. You need to adapt and adjust day by day, because everyone is listening only to what he wants to hear.

Therefore, that art of listening has to be promoted. You must learn to keep your mind relaxed and let the pressure of the ego drop. Once the ego is out of your way, you listen, you commune with the present environment. As you begin to live in the present, you imbibe knowledge. The moment the intellect opens itself and you are free from the pressure of complexes, you develop an insight that changes your personality. Sublime teachings enter your heart, and your heart accepts them. Once you accept the teachings you become enlightened. So listening is a great art, and through listening you start your practice on the path of *jnana*, or knowledge.

Listening is followed by reflection. The contents of reflection in Vedanta concern the nature of the Self. Vedanta presents various rational ways of practicing reflection. It tells you that intrinsically you are not the body, but the eternal Self. And by listening to these teachings and reflecting upon them, you understand that your ego is not you, but rather a diseased development in your consciousness. It is a hurdle, an obstacle.

When your mind is highly complexed, the ego becomes more definite and defined, and it asserts itself every moment. If you are afraid or worried, or overcome by a sense of frustration, then the ego asserts more. But during those times when your mind is relaxed and you are joyous, when there is a sense of fulfillment, ego does not assert itself.

If some person does not recognize you, does not say “good morning,” or does not give you a good seat, it will not make any difference if you have a sense of fulfillment and ego is not asserting itself. But if ego is there, even if someone gave you the best seat in the house, still you would feel as if you had been insulted.

Listening and reflection, the first two stages of *tattwa jnana*, are meant to remove that sense of ego and to develop an aspiration that puts an end to egoistic consciousness. They are followed by the third stage, meditation.

Meditation has two aspects—a negating aspect and an affirming aspect. The negating aspect of meditation consists of negating the mind, intellect, *pranas* (vital forces), body and the ego-sense by recognizing them as the not-Self. The affirming aspect consists of allowing the mind to continuously flow towards *Brahman*, and asserting your identity with the Divine Self. This is known as *Brahmakaravritti*—allowing your mind to flow on and on towards the Divine Self. Through this process your intellect becomes enlightened and your reason turns into intuition. You realize, “I am the Self.” This is the path of knowledge known as *tattwa jnana*.

PART 2
NEXT MONTH

