

Self-Realization Through Vedanta and Yoga

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Self-realization is one's becoming aware of one's true Self and abiding in it. It is realizing that one is not the psycho-physical entity consisting of the body, mind, intellect and ego; but rather, one is the Self—all-pervading, birthless and deathless. The Self is described in Yogic parlance as *Ātman*, *Brahman*, Ultimate Reality and Truth. It is not enough to understand this theoretically or intellectually, but one must actually experience it.

It is important at this stage to dilate on the term Vedanta. Properly interpreted, Vedanta is a systematic search for the Ultimate Reality. Vedanta maintains that man's nature is divine, and that it is the aim of man's life to unfold this divine nature. This basic truth is universal—that is, every religion that has inspired mankind has been trying to state the same facts. Vedanta offers that system of thought and way of life for which men have been eternally looking; the universal religion, “which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite, like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahmanic or Buddhistic, Christian or Moham-medan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for every human being.” (Swami Vivekananda)

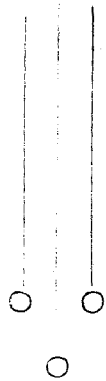
According to Vedanta, Truth is universal and all mankind and all existence are one. The philosophy of Vedanta preaches the unity of God as Ultimate Reality and accepts every faith as a valid means for its own followers to realize the Truth. On closer scrutiny, we find that the Vedanta philosophy is one of the oldest systems and has provided the highest ideals of life as well as the best explanation of the phenomenal world. According to Vedanta, the phenomenal universe is the expression of one Supreme Being, the Eternal Existence. That Eternal Existence or Ultimate Reality is called by various names, and is worshipped under various forms. The main thesis of the Vedanta philosophy is : “Truth is one, Sages call it by different names.”

When we recall that Truth is one and that Truth is true all through eternity, it is a truism to say that the same truths that were realized and discovered by the ancient seers of India are the truths of today—and will remain truths throughout eternity.

Far from being a purely speculative philosophy, Vedanta is a very practical philosophy and has given the world the most solid foundation for a system of religion which is nameless, creedless and without dogma. It is the universal religion which underlies all the religions of the world—various religions being so many expressions of this universal religion.

Vedanta maintains that the practical side of philosophy is religion and the theoretical side of religion is philosophy.

According to Vedanta philosophy, that which is unscientific and unphilosophical, cannot be called religious. It must appeal to our reason, and that which appeals to our reason must be based upon truth. Vedanta embraces various systems or branches of science which are



described in Sanskrit under different names. The Sanskrit name for each of these systems is Yoga. On diving deep into the method by which this science of Yoga was developed, it is fascinating to find that, even in those ancient times, observations and experiments were employed as tools of research in discovering the secret truths of nature and the laws that govern our lives. The finer forces of nature and the description of their laws, are embodied in the various branches of the science of Yoga.

According to Vedanta philosophy, there are five layers, called *Koṣas* or sheaths (coverings) enveloping the *Ātman*. Due to ignorance, we identify the *Ātman* or Ultimate Reality (the true Self) with the non-*Ātman*, the sheaths or coverings of the Self. These five layers are : (1) the Physical Sheath, or the Food Sheath, (2) the Vital Sheath, (3) the Mental Sheath, (4) the Intellectual Sheath, and (5) the Blissful Sheath. When all the Sheaths have been transcended, the *Ātman* alone remains. Shankara, the foremost exponent of Vedanta philosophy, sums it up beautifully in *Viveka Chūdāmaṇi* : “When all the five Sheaths have been eliminated (discriminated or discerned as being other than the Self), the Self of man appears pure, the essence of everlasting and unalloyed bliss, indwelling, supreme and self-effulgent.”

The Physical Sheath

The first or outermost Sheath is the *Annamaya Koṣa* or gross, Physical Sheath, the physical body. The yogis say that it is made of and sustained by food. It comprises the material sheath. The gross, Physical Sheath is also termed as “Food Sheath.” It is so called because it arises from the essence of the food taken by the eater. It exists because of the food regularly taken in and, ultimately after death, it must decompose to become food again. The substance of physical structure rising from food, existing in food, and going back to food, is naturally, and most appropriately termed, “Food Sheath.” It is a mass of skin, flesh, blood, bones, etc., and can never be the eternally pure, self-existent *Ātman*. Any intelligent and discriminating man knows that he is not this physical body, for the body, is subject to change. The body, consisting of arms, legs, etc., cannot be *Ātman*, for one continues to live even after its particular limbs are gone. Moreover, the body, which is subject to the rule of Self, cannot be the Self which is the Ruler of all. And yet, ignorance is so deep and universal that we identify ourselves with the body in our day-to-day activities in the empirical world. Vedanta believes that all bodies die. The Self cannot die. Therefore, the body cannot be the Self.

The Vital Sheath

The second covering of the *Ātman* is called “*Prāṇamaya Koṣa*” or the Vital Sheath. It is made up of the vital forces and organs by which bodily actions are performed. The Vital Sheath controls all the organs of action, and it is five-fold with its five different functions. The vital forces are called the *prāṇas*. They consist of *prāṇa* (breathing), *apāna* (elimination), *samāna* (digestion), *vyāna* (circulation) and *udāna* (nerve currents). From experience, we have found that if we eat, these vital forces remain strong. But, if we starve, they become weak. Since these Vital Sheaths are also perishable, they also are not the Self.

The Mental Sheath

The third is *Manomaya Koṣa* or the Mental Sheath, the sheath of the mundane mind. It consists of *manas* (faculty of perception), *buddhi* (intellect) and *ahaṁkāra* (ego). The mind cannot be the Self because it manifests through thought and thoughts are extremely various—now good, now bad. The mind is too changeable to be the Self.

The Intellectual Sheath

The fourth sheath is *Vijñānamaya Koṣa*, or the Sheath of Higher Intelligence. Yogis believe that, when one has penetrated his own nature to this sheath, he gains knowledge of the universe as a manifestation of Ultimate Reality.

It is important to point out here that the term “mind” is not used in the same sense as it is used in Western psychology. What is known as “mind” in Western psychology is described



in Eastern psychology by the various functions of the mind—such as “mind” (the receiving faculty—*manas*), “intellect” (the discriminating faculty—*buddhi*), and “ego” (the knower or experienter—*ahamkāra*).

There is a subtle difference between mind and intellect in Vedānta philosophy. Mind is that which entertains our doubts, joys, desires, etc., and which interrupts the constant flow of thought. Mind can fly to things and places seen or heard. Intellect, in each one of us, is the determining factor, whereas, the mind is the doubting one. Mind, when a determined decision or a willed judgment is required, takes the form of the intellect. However, the intellect is subtler than the mind because it ventures forth into realms unheard of or unseen, whereas, mind will only reach things or places already seen or heard.

The Blissful Sheath

There is a fifth sheath, called *Ānandamaya Kośa*, or the covering of the “bliss”. This covering is revealed to us in the state of deep sleep. It is called the covering of the bliss because it is the covering closest to the blissful *Ātman*. It is considered blissful also because, whatever the condition in which we happen to be in our waking and dream states, once we enter the portals of sleep, we all invariably experience the same undisturbed peace and bliss. But this covering is also a creation of ignorance.

The Ātman

“The *Ātman* (true Self), is beyond all thought, one, without birth or death, whom sword cannot pierce or fire burn, whom the air cannot dry or water melt, the beginningless and endless, the immovable, the intangible, the omniscient, the omnipotent Being—neither the body nor the mind, but beyond them both.”

The *Ātman* is beyond the five coverings. In order to realize our Self, the Ultimate Reality, we have to go beyond the three states of consciousness, waking, dreaming and sleep, and reach the *turiya* or fourth, which is termed *Samādhi*.

According to Vedānta, the outstanding nature of the Ultimate Reality : (1) is Pure Sentience or Consciousness; (2) is never born and will never die. It has no origin or end. It never decays nor undergoes changes and mutations; (3) is non-material, of the nature of Pure Existence, Pure Consciousness and Pure Bliss—*Sat-Chit-Ānanda*. (4) is non-moving and actionless. It only witnesses.

The *Ātman* is beyond the mind, beyond the ego. The ego is the primary expression of the *Ātman*. It screens off its very origin and also projects itself as the mind and through the mind as the world. The mind thus projected takes itself and the world to be real. It looks to the external world for happiness. The ego derives its existence and power from the *Ātman*. But, not recognizing this fact, it keeps itself attached to the intellect, the mind and the body; enjoying and suffering through them. As long as the ego is conscious of and attached to the body, mind and the intellect, it is not conscious of the *Ātman*. The moment it withdraws from them and transcends itself by trying to trace out its own origin, the body consciousness goes away and the *Ātman* or Self-Consciousness dawns. The *Ātman* is realized only when the ego disintegrates and dissolves into Pure Consciousness.

To realize the *Ātman*, which is beyond the mind, the mind should be stilled and transcended. The mind can act in two ways. It can either keep on engaging itself with the external world in its search for happiness, or it can withdraw itself from the outside world and try to trace out its own origin. This faculty of the mind to withdraw should be cultivated if one is to realize the *Ātman*. The mind should be trained not to dabble with worldly thoughts but to retreat within itself deeper and deeper. It should be made to remember its true nature constantly, throughout the day, in and through all its daily activities. In addition, one or two hours a day should be set aside for contemplative meditation on one's Self. By all this, one must try to transcend the mind and merge into the Pure Consciousness. In fact, Yoga psychology aims

at preparing the mind to catch glimpses of the *Ātman* and then, eventually, transform the mind Pure Consciousness. The word "*Nirodha*" (suppression) is used by Patanjali and commentator Vyāsa in the sense of transformation. Swami Vivekananda, Swami Abhedananda, Sri Aurobindo and others have opined that we can transform the mind into its own nature, which is the Pure Consciousness.

In his Yoga aphorisms, Patanjali has disclosed the secret of bringing under control the distracted modifications of the mind and also the technique of transforming the mind stuff into higher consciousness.

In Vedanta, the path leading to Self-realization consists of three stages or steps, namely:

(1) *Śravaṇa*—hearing. First, an aspirant has to hear about the Ultimate Reality from a realized soul. Unless he learns the philosophy of Vedanta and comprehends what is to be attained, he will not have a correct ideal of the goal nor the method to reach it.

(2) *Manana*—cogitation. After hearing about the Ultimate Reality, the aspirant should cogitate or ponder over what he has heard. He must analyze and assess it through reasoning and then come to a firm conviction that it is the supreme goal to be achieved in life. Vedanta reveals a conscious process by which man realize his true and immortal nature. It requires that the aspirant be convinced of its truth and practicality.

(3) *Nididhyāsana*—contemplative meditation. This is the last and the most important stage leading one directly to Self-realization. Also called *Jñāna Niṣṭhā*, it is a process by which man consciously seeks to realize his true Self. It is a process in which our inner equipment consisting of the ego, the subconscious, the intellect and the mind stuff plays a vital role.

In order to realize the Self, one has to listen about the Truth of Ultimate Reality from the lips of an illumined soul. Then, after contemplating upon the Self, resolve that he is determined to follow the path leading to Self-realization.

Finally, one has to meditate on a regular basis, systematically and sincerely. The importance of meditation in the life of an aspirant need hardly be over-emphasized. In fact, meditation is given the greatest significance in all of Yogic and Vedantic literature. It is not the scope of this paper to expand upon the subject of meditation. Suffice it to say that one can eventually realize the Self through meditation.

It is fervently hoped that the foregoing discussion 'Self-realization through Vedanta and Yoga', will stimulate the sincere seeker to pursue the spiritual path with better understanding, dedication, devotion and a determined will until he attains *Samādhi* (Pure Consciousness).

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