

Vedas

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Vedas are the ultimate authorities of Sanātana Dharma (commonly known as Hinduism). The word *veda* literally means “knowledge” and is derived from the root *vid* (“to know”). The Vedas represent the vast treasury of spiritual knowledge revealed to many different *ṛṣis* (sages) at different times in their transcendental meditative state and were handed down from one generation to the next by oral tradition. Because they are revealed scripture, the Vedas are called Śruti (“that which is heard”). The Vedas are eternal since the truths contained in them are eternal (*anādi*). Just as the law of gravitation existed long before it was discovered and would exist even if humanity paid no attention to it, spiritual truths contained in the Vedas are eternal. Similarly, knowledge about God, who is without a beginning and without an end, is also eternal. The Vedas do not owe their authority to anybody, unlike Jainism to Mahāvīra or Buddhism to Buddha or Islām to Mohammed. The Vedas are themselves the authority. Since there is no specific author to them, the Vedas are called *apauruṣeya*.

The Vedas remained as a massive collection of spiritual knowledge for a long time until the great sage Bādarāyaṇa or Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa (popularly known just as Vyāsa or Veda Vyāsa) categorized this cumulative knowledge into four Vedas: *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda*, and *Atharvaṇaveda* (or *Atharvaveda*). *Ṛgveda* presents hymns and poems in praise of various natural forces such as Fire, Gods and Demi-Gods. *Yajurveda* contains sacrificial prayers presented both in poetry and prose format. *Sāmaveda* contains *sāmans* that mostly consist of stanzas taken from *Ṛgveda* and are meant to be sung to fixed melodies/meters. *Atharvaṇaveda* contains charms, spells, and incantations which constitute the guidelines on family life and practical living. Sage Veda Vyāsa assigned to each of his principal disciples further care of the Vedas. Thus, Paila was placed in charge of *Ṛgveda*, Vaiśampāyana in charge of *Yajurveda*, Jaimini in charge of *Sāmaveda*, and Sumantu in charge of *Atharvaṇaveda*. Later, two branches of *Yajurveda* were recognized: the original *Yajurveda* of Vaiśampāyana was called *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda* and the later *Śukla Yajurveda* was attributed to Yājñavalkya, one of the earlier disciples of Vaiśampāyana. These different sages (*ṛṣis*) taught the respective Veda to their disciples and the latter to their disciples and the succession continued. Thus Vedas were memorized and recited by successive generations of disciples of the ancient *Ṛṣis*. The Vedas were organized into 1180 *śākhās* or branches. Large portions of the Vedas were lost over the years and are no longer available. We have only about 8 or 9 *śākhās* and a number of Upaniṣads available now. The Vedas teach that God (Brahman or the Supreme) is one but there are different ways to reach that God and that all religious paths, if followed with faith and devotion along with right conduct, will eventually lead to the same Supreme God. This is the unique greatness of the Vedas and Vedānta (Sanātana Dharma or Hinduism) as a Universal Religion, explicitly proposed by Swāmi Vivekānada in his writings.

Each Veda is traditionally divided into three parts: *Karma Kāṇḍa* (the work portion), *Upāsana Kāṇḍa* (dealing with worship and meditation), and *Jñāna Kāṇḍa* (the knowledge portion). The work portion consists of the use of the Vedic *mantras* (hymns) relating to the duties of a *gṛhastha* (householder), husband, wife, student, teacher, renunciate, etc. Furthermore, it contains elaborate descriptions of various life cycle

rituals such as naming of a child (*nāmakaraṇa*), sacred thread ceremony (*upanayana*), marriage (*vivāha*), etc. *Upāsana Kāṇḍa* contains procedures for worship rituals, stories relating to these rituals, meditation practices, and related topics. *Jñāna Kāṇḍa* contains the profound philosophical portion of the Vedas. The essence of the Vedic knowledge is called *Vedānta*, which comprises the Upaniṣads. Since the Upaniṣads occur at the end of the Vedas (Veda + *anta*), these have become synonymous with *Vedānta*.

Another system of division of the Vedas has also found wide use. In this, the Vedas are divided into *Mantra* and *Brāhmaṇa* portions. *Mantra* portion consists of hymns while the *Brāhmaṇa* portion contains liturgies (prescribed rituals for worship) in prose. A collection of *Mantras* is called *Samhitā* and, therefore, the *Mantra* portion of the Vedas is also referred to as *Samhitā*. *Brāhmaṇas* explain the hymns of the *Samhitās* and also provide information about the origin and meaning of Vedic ceremonies, concepts, and terminologies; give instructions on the use of particular verses and meters; and describe the importance of prayers, sacrifices, and their correct observance. *Brāhmaṇa* includes within it another component called *Āraṇyaka*, which includes within it the *Upaniṣad*. However, there are a few exceptions to this in that some Upaniṣads (as exemplified by the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*) occur in *Samhitās*. *Āraṇyakas* deal with meditations based on interpretations of worship rituals while the *Upaniṣads*, as described above, are philosophical treatises primarily dealing with the nature of Brahman but dealing also with many other topics relevant to life.

Veda Vyāsa was one of the mightiest intellects ever born on the soil of Bhārat. In addition to codifying the Vedas, he wrote the most remarkable epic *Mahābhārata*, in which is found the *Bhagavad Gītā* (considered the essence of the Upaniṣads), *Viṣṇu Sahasranāma*, and other such texts important to the Hindus. Because of its profundity as a scriptural source to the Hindus, *Mahābhārata* is also called *Pañcama Veda* (fifth Veda). The great Veda Vyāsa is also the author of the 18 *Purāṇās* (including the famous *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*) and *Brahma Sūtras*, that occupy a high place in Hindu scriptural literature. *Purāṇās* try to present the Vedic truths in a story form for the benefit of the lay public. *Purāṇās* and epics such as *Mahābhārata* are called *Smṛtis* (meaning memorized texts). The *Brahma Sūtras* (that belong to *Nyāya* philosophy) constitute a treatise that sets out the norms for interpreting the Upaniṣads and gives out terse *sūtras* (aphorisms) to arrive at the right conclusion regarding Brahman.

The Upaniṣads (representing the *Śrutis*), the *Bhagavad Gītā* (representing the *Smṛtis*), and the *Brahma Sūtras* (representing the *Nyāya* or logical texts) constitute the three important scriptural texts to guide one to one's final goal on the path to Brahman. These three texts together are called *Prasthāna trayam*. The texts constituting the *Prasthāna trayam* are considered the final authority (equivalent to the Vedas) to Hindus on all matters scriptural. If there is ever a conflict between the statements in *Prasthāna trayam* and other Hindu scriptural texts, the verdict of the former alone is accepted as final.

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A companion article titled [Upaniṣads and Mahāvākyas](#) is also available at this site.