

Essentials of Vedānta

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Vedānta is the religious philosophy of Hinduism. As is true of all major religions, its purpose is to help us cope with the complexities of the world and the uncertainties of life. Vedānta literally means, in Sānskrit, the end (*anta*) of knowledge (*veda*) – more precisely, of spiritual knowledge. In this article, we focus on its basic principles.

The first principle of Vedānta is: God is one but there are many paths. There are as many paths to God as there are people. So Vedānta's world-view is pluralistic, inclusive, and accommodating, with emphasis on coexistence and nonviolent dialogue. This is beautifully captured in the following *mantra* from the Rigveda: *ekam sad-vīprā bahudhā vadanti* – Truth is one, but the wise refer to It by various names. This insight is a direct result of India's experience of living in cultural plurality and multiplicity. The world is looking for precisely such a religious philosophy – one that can be used to understand cultural diversity, multiplicity, and plurality, so that we can live in comfort with religious dissent, difference, and variety. That is the beauty and historical relevance of Vedānta. It allows us to leverage each other's strengths and collectively manage our weaknesses.

The second principle of Vedānta is: Creation is a unity, it is one, it is alive, it is an organism and not a mechanism. You and I and the people of the whole world and the many manifestations in creation are one – we are all threads of the same fabric. Take one thread away and the beauty of the fabric is lost. The mineral world, the plant kingdom, the animal kingdom, the world of humans, and the world of divinity, they are all manifestations of life and are part of the same continuum. Take just one person – yourself – and realize that you are a multi-dimensional being, a fabric woven of physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual components. You crystallize in yourself the entire complexity of this world. The world is your own expansion.

This second principle of Vedānta makes Vedāntins, i.e. those who subscribe to this philosophy, very kind, considerate, compassionate, loving, caring, sharing persons. It is very difficult for such a person to hurt an ant, pluck a flower, cut a tree, or pollute a river because he sees the same pulsations of life in all these manifestations as in himself. The world is not a mechanism for anyone to manipulate for personal and egoistic ends and enjoyment. Only one who alleviates the pain of others experiences true divinity and spirituality. To truly live this second principle, it is not enough to get the intellectual understanding that the world is one. It must be expressed through our emotional relationship with the world – a relationship where we are able to share and sacrifice.

The third principle of Vedānta is that the material, phenomenal world we see outside and the mental world we experience inside are expressions of an underlying, invisible Reality, which Vedānta calls Brahman. It is the all-pervading Consciousness. It requires the purity and sensitivity of sages to appreciate this. Only when the mind is absolutely pure – this happens when the mind is non-demanding and accommodating – will one be able to look inside and understand the nature of the spirit. Not only understand but become one with it. This underlying spiritual Reality is Brahman, which means the “all

accommodating.” We may call it the Universal Consciousness, identical with one’s individual consciousness, the ground of the entire phenomenal, manifested world. The sages have said that every individual can live in constant contact with that Brahman provided he leads a contemplative life. So Vedānta prescribes a life of contemplation, reflection, and meditation. Through meditation, we can tap into Brahman. We can call it God if we wish, this principle that transcends everything. But though it is transcendental, we human beings have an instrument – a pure mind, an integrated intellect – by which we can come in daily contact with that Brahman. And once there, we can draw from it continuously in terms of health, happiness, love, passion, energy, and creativity.

A corollary of the third principle is that what is visible is unreal. The world is in a state of constant flux and change; there is nothing permanent in it. We cannot stop the world. So it is better to flow with it than oppose it, to dance with it than quarrel with it, to be with it than be away from it. With this understanding of the world, the mind becomes very peaceful. It is the only way to get peace, for otherwise we will live in constant fear of losing what we have obtained. Enjoyment is possible when we are without attachment. One must be rooted in one’s own Self, which is the Ātman, which is Consciousness.

The fourth principle of Vedānta is that each one of us has latent divinity. To reach God or Reality, we therefore do not have to go anywhere else; we only have to probe within. Divinity is within each of us. The whole purpose of life is to manifest that divinity and realize our full potential. To the extent that we manifest our divinity, to that extent we are happy and fulfilled. If we are unhappy, it is either because we have not realized that we are a part of divinity or because we are not doing anything to manifest it.

Vedānta says that this ever-changing, dynamic, and complex world is an opportunity to explore and express our inner divinity and potentiality. Instead of running away from the world, we should use it as a wonderful challenge to know who we are and express our identity. This is the teaching of Lord Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavad Gītā and it is a very practical teaching. The world is to be courted, not avoided. It must be used as an instrument for us, which we can do if we live like the lotus in a pool of water – detached but engaged.

Distilling all these teachings, Vedānta gives us practical guidance, as all true religions must, on how to live in this world. It teaches the life style of Niṣkāma Karma or Karma Yoga, i.e. disinterested action – living in this world performing one’s duties without bothering about who gets the rewards or results of one’s work. The greatest joy is when we do our duties conscientiously, to the best of our ability, and forget the rewards.

Happiness is within – that is a central teaching of Vedānta. When we have realized happiness, we have reached our destination. So destination is not an outward, extroverted movement but an inward, spiritual, journey – going within oneself. This is a very profound and practical teaching. The happiness we are all seeking is within ourselves. And that happiness is God. Expressing happiness in an interactive world is the true experience of spirituality. This is how Vedānta integrates one’s worldly activity with spiritual pursuits and the experience of divinity on an ongoing basis. It is then that we come to live in a zone of timelessness – and timelessness is happiness and happiness is God. That God is living within each one of us.