

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION

Navigating the waters of Jnana Yoga, Yoga Vedanta and Advaita Vedanta may seem daunting to Yoga teachers and practitioners. We're extremely fortunate to have scholars, Vedantis and Jnana Yoga experts guide us through our subject. The Vedanta tradition is a broad subject, and so our special section focuses upon one stream of Vedanta: *advaita*. We begin with Dr. Edwin Bryant, who takes us inside the tradition through a brilliant overview of the origins and philosophy of Vedanta. We learn how, much as Sri Patanjali systematized Yoga, the sage Badarayana attempted to do the same with the study of the *Upanishads* through his *Vedanta Sutra*.

It was Sri Adi Shankaracharya who gave us the *advaita* philosophy in its fully polished form. Swami Yogananda, Sri Gurudev's first monastic initiate, guides us through the texts central to the study of Vedanta, as well as the fourfold *sadhana* of Sri Shankara.

Adding to our understanding of *advaita*, is our interview with Dr. David Frawley who illuminates the relationship between Yoga and Vedanta. Author Peter Marchand discusses his wonderful new book on Jnana Yoga in our

interview. Any discussion of Advaita Vedanta must include one of the foremost Jnana Yogis of modern day, Sri Ramana Maharshi. We are fortunate to have David Godman, an official biographer of Sri Ramana who has been living near Sri Ramana Ashram for over twenty-five years, give us a greater understanding of the life and teachings of this great Jnana Yogi. David also shares inspiring stories of Sri H. W. L. Poonja (Papaji), who met Sri Ramana in 1944. We also excerpt passages from a long-lost manuscript of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, considered to be one of the great jnanis of the 20th century.

Jnana Yoga, in practice, is essentially a journey in Self-inquiry. Sri Gurudev leads us through a process that one can make part of a daily meditation. Then, we close the special section with a look at western methods that are perhaps surprisingly linked to Vedantic methods of Self-inquiry. Swami Tatatmananda discusses the relationship between psychological and spiritual growth. We also interviewed Byron Katie, well-known for the process she developed called "The Work." Katie shows us how to take Self-inquiry from concept to experience. Enjoy the journey...

INSIDE THE VEDANTA TRADITION

By Edwin F. Bryant, Ph.D.

What is Vedanta?

The Vedanta tradition comes out of the *Upanishadic* corpus (body of writings). Essentially, Vedanta is an interpretation of the *Upanishads*. The word "Vedanta" is comprised of two words: *veda* and *anta*. *Anta* means "end." And the term can be understood in two ways. "*Anta*" can refer to the chronological layer of the *Upanishads*, which come at the "end" of the *Vedic* period and textual corpus, the *Sruti*, the highest corpus of scriptural texts for orthodox Hindus. The *Sruti* consists of the four *Vedas*, the *Brahmana* texts, the *Aranyakas* (forest books) and the *Upanishads*. Thus, these latter are the "end" in the sense of being the final strata of this corpus. "*Anta*" can also be taken to mean "end" in so far as the *Upanishads* are the pinnacle, the highest part of *Vedas* for the Vedanta tradition. This is because the *Vedic* hymns and *Brahmanas* contain solicitations, rituals, rites, fire ceremonies and other practices that deal with material and mundane concerns. The Vedanta tradition sees the *Upanishads* as dealing with higher truths, the ultimate knowledge.

The *Upanishads* are not consistent in their teachings, however. In some parts, they present an *advaita* type of view that the material world may not be real; there is only one reality, *Brahman*. In other places, they speak of the world as if it is real. In some places, *Brahman* is depicted as a Supreme person and in others *Brahman* is presented as beyond personality. In some sections, the *atman* (soul) is spoken of as real and individual and in others, the *atman* is not a distinct individual but one and the same as the universal *Brahman*. So, there are many different statements that are not always apparently consistent.

The Upanishads

The *Upanishads* are not, strictly speaking, philosophical texts. The *Upanishads* are a collection of spontaneous utterances coming from mystic experiences. They are mystical poetic texts rather than systematic philosophy, like that which is found in the writings of Patanjali and the other later post-*Vedic Sutra* traditions. There is a difference between traditional and scholarly

understandings of the *Upanishads*. Scholars view the differences in language, content and style throughout the *Upanishads* as an indication that they were written by different *rishis* (sages) over different periods of time. Thus, the heterogeneous nature of the *Upanishads* is to be expected, as this reflects the fact that different sages were articulating their different personal mystical experience at different periods of time.

Traditional orthodox Hindus don't see it this way. They believe that these *Srutis* are divine revelations rather than the products of centuries of human inspiration. Another term for the *Sruti* is *apaurusheya*—not produced by any human being. So if one takes the view that the *Upanishads* are *Sruti*, as do the traditional commentators, then the consequence is that these texts are considered divine and not humanly composed. If they are divine, then they must be perfect. If they are perfect, then their teachings must be consistent. If we say the teachings are consistent then we have to come up with a hermeneutic—a systematic method of explaining the apparent inconsistencies—and that is the Vedanta tradition. The Vedantins are a group of post-*Upanishadic* scholastics or *jnanis* whose presupposition is that the texts are divine, perfect and consistent. And if this is the case, then any *apparent* inconsistencies are because people haven't figured a way to interpret them properly. This is what the various Vedantins set out to do.

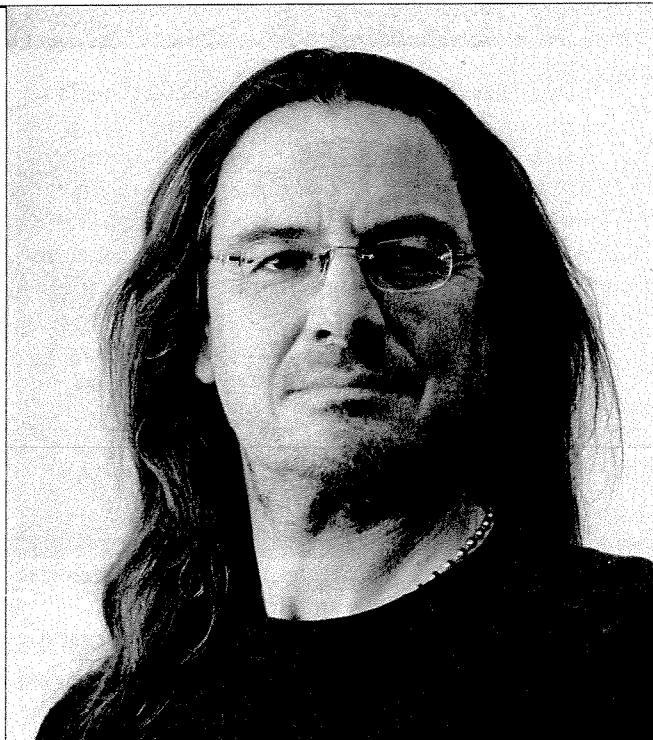
Badarayana's *Vedanta Sstras*

Just as Patanjali came and systematized the variant schools of Yoga into one system in his *Yoga Sstras* in the 3rd century CE, so the sage Badarayana wrote the *Vedanta Sstras* to provide a method to clarify and systematize the variant possible readings of the *Upanishads*. These *Sstras* became one of the three main texts of the Vedanta tradition, the other two being the *Upanishads* themselves and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

But, does Badarayana succeed? No, because he wrote a text that is even more obscure than the *Upanishads*. There is no way you can understand the references in his *Vedanta Sstras* without a commentary. So, now we have a double problem! At least the *Upanishads* are readable in most places, especially the later ones, albeit perhaps heterogeneous and seemingly contradictory. But now we have really cryptic *Vedanta Sstras* that themselves require interpretation and clarification. This now gives three layers to the Vedanta tradition: the old *Upanishads* themselves, the *Vedanta Sstras* that were supposed to clarify them and, then, a commentary on both these texts, of which Shankara, centuries later, was a prominent forerunner.

Sri Adi Shankaracharya

Sri Shankara came along in the 7th–8th century, and he reconciled the apparent differences in a brilliantly unique way. He divided all the *Upanishadic* statements into two



Dr. Edwin Bryant

categories, which he called *paramarthika* (higher truth) and *vyavaharika* (conventional truth). Essentially, he believed that the *Upanishads* are presenting two levels of truth. Wherever they speak of *Brahman* as a God with personal qualities, the world as being real, the soul as individual and real, they are addressing the lower level of truth from a conventional everyday perspective. Wherever they address *atman* and *Brahman* as one, the names and forms of the world (*nama rupa*) as unreal, and *Brahman* as trans-personal beyond personality, they are presenting statements from the *paramarthika*, or higher level of truth.

Two or three hundred years after Shankara in the 11th–12th century, the next major theologian was Ramanuja. He taught a system of Vasistha Advaita, or differentiated non-duality. He accepted that the absolute Truth, *Brahman*, is non-dual, *advaita*, but posited that there are differences within this oneness. Specifically, there is *Brahman* as personal Supreme being, Narayana/Vishnu, *Brahman* as the world, and *Brahman* as individual soul. The main difference from Shankara's Advaita Vedanta is that the world and the individual soul are real and eternal for Ramanuja.

So, for Ramanuja, when the *Upanishads* speak of *Brahman* as beyond personal qualities, it means Vishnu has no material or mundane qualities. Whenever the texts speak of *atman* and *Brahman* as one, they intend that they are one in quality, being both *Brahman*, but still distinct individuals. Whenever they speak of the names and forms of the world as unreal, they intend that they are temporary (or unmanifest in the state of *pralaya*, periodic cosmic dissolution) but that matter, *prakriti*, is still a real power of

God. In this way, Ramanuja's hermeneutics, his way of accounting for the heterogeneous statements of the *Upanishads*, differs radically from Shankara. Madhva came along a century later and solidified Ramanuja's distinctions between God/Vishnu, the real world and the individual souls even further, rejecting Shankara's metaphysics even more vigorously. His school is known as *dvaita*, duality, the exact opposite of *advaita*. The point is to recognize there are numerous schools of Vedanta, and they are quite different in their understanding of the nature of God, the world and the soul.

What is Advaita Vedanta?

The word "*advaita*" means non-dual: *a + dvaita* (dual). The "*a*" in front of a noun negates the noun to which it is prefixed. Indian philosophy, and, for that matter, philosophy and science in general, set out to understand the nature and relationship between three entities: the world we can see (manifest reality), the living beings in that world and the source from which they come—the ultimate Truth that is underpinning everything. For Shankara and his *advaita* philosophy, there is no distinction between these three. Let's consider briefly how he deals with these three entities.

Essentially his argument is that the world is a false superimposition, a mirage. It is not actually there, at least not as we perceive it—whatever is there is actually the non-dual (*advaita*) *Brahman*. In the desert there is just sand but, out of illusion caused by dehydration, you imagine you see water and trees. We call that a mirage, and it is a favorite metaphor for the illusoriness of the world, for Shankara. Just as such a mirage appears to us in the desert but isn't real—there is only all-pervading sand in reality—so the world appears to be real, but is just a mirage; in reality, there is just all-pervading, omnipresent *Brahman*. So, Shankara has gotten rid of the world (he says it was never there in the first place) and now we're left with the individual soul and *Brahman* from our initial trio of Ultimate Truth, world and soul.

In conventional reality we perceive individuals: I hold that I'm me and you are you. What is it that makes me think I'm me and you're you? It's because I'm in my body with my mind, which appear to me to be different from you in yours. But Shankara has just established that there is no world of physical form and shape and no mind (the mind, bear in mind, is a product of physical matter, *prakriti* in almost all Hindu thought). So, what keeps your individual soul, *atman*, distinct from mine?

Imagine you have ten glasses of various shapes and you turn each upside down. Within each glass, there is a pocket of air captured when you turn the glass upside down. Are each of these pockets of air different from one

another or from the greater body of omnipresent air outside the glasses? The pockets of air are of course inhabiting the glasses of different shapes and permeating those shapes. But what if these glasses were never there in the first place—if they were just a mirage? Are all the pockets of air still distinct if there is no glass to contain and individualize them? What is the difference between these pockets of air and the greater universe of air all around once you remove the glasses? They merge into the greater universe of air and lose any individuality they might appear to have had when contained in their various glasses.

Shankara says *all* name and form is a mirage—the body and mind are mirages. Therefore, the pockets of air were always one with the greater air, they were never separate to begin with—So, likewise with the *atman*, the different souls inside the forms, which we name humans, animals, insects, etc. Once you argue that the names and forms containing these are not real, where's the *atman* that was supposedly within them? It's not that it is not there, but it is actually one with the universal *Brahman*, for Shankara, and it always was. To have ever thought otherwise is ignorance, illusion—*maya*.

Now Shankara has gotten rid of both the world and the individual soul as separate entities, that is, as dualities—individual separate things. He's left with the absolute truth *Brahman*, with no dualities. *A-dvaita*. All that's left is *Brahman*. Where are your dualities? They were never there in the first place. No world of forms and dualities, no individuals, all is *Brahman*. Hence one of Shankara's *mahavakyas* (representational *Upanishadic* quote): "*Sarvam idam khalu Brahman*" all this, indeed, is *Brahman*.

The Vedantic Traditions

There was lively debate and intellectual exchange between the "six *darshanas*" classical schools of philosophy—the Samkhya, Yoga, Vaisheshika, Nyaya and Mimamsa traditions rejected Advaita Vedanta, as did the "heterodox" schools of Buddhism and Jainism and, also, within schools. We have seen how the post-Shankara Vedantins, Ramanuja and Madhva founded new Vedanta *sampradaya* lineages that differed from Shankara, as did others after them. Most of this has been lost in the Hinduism that's been exported to the West, much of which is sometimes called neo-Vedanta (it began in the Colonial period with Hindu apologists), and has tended to be exclusively *advaita*. Hinduism in the West has to a great extent been exported through neo-Vedantic categories and language and blended with yogic practice, along with some tantric sprinklings.

With regard to some of the prominent teachers who came to or were known in the West, Sri Ramana, Nisargadatta Maharaj, Sri Swami Satchidananda, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois

and Sri Swami Vishnudevananda came from the *advaita* tradition. Sri T. Krishnamacharya came from the Ramanuja lineage, as did his disciples Sri TKV Desikachar and Sri BKS Iyengar, and Srila Bhaktivedanta Swami came from an offshoot of the Madhva lineage (Chaitanya).

So there are other Vedantic traditions, *advaita* is just one stream, and of course there are other schools of thought. Yoga teachers should know that there is not just one bland version of things. Sages saw things in different ways. Patanjali, for one, and the Yoga school, hold the world to be real, with multiple individual souls that don't merge into one *Brahman* upon attaining enlightenment. Patanjali didn't even use the word *Brahman*. And, Vedanta isn't the only School of Jnana Yoga—Samkhya, Vaishesika and Nyaya were also distinct schools of *jnana*.

Jnana Yoga Sadhana

Jnana Yoga is that system that tries to attain enlightenment, not primarily by doing but through analyzing, understanding, contemplating and ultimately *perceiving* things for what they actually are. That is why it is called the Yoga of knowledge or wisdom. It involves a transformation of consciousness primarily attained through the intellect, rather than through action or devotion (although these latter may play different roles in this larger enterprise, depending on the school).

Jnana Yoga *sadhana* varies according to school. For the Advaita Vedanta tradition, Shankara gives various practices in different writings (his *Gita* commentary, for example, has different stresses than his Vedanta one), but the process is definitely one of Jnana Yoga, the study of Vedanta. The actual study of Vedanta has a threefold component, which is preceded by a fourfold preparatory undertaking, for Shankara. The fourfold prerequisites for studying the Vedanta are: *nityanitya-vastuviveka*, the ability to discriminate between what is eternal and what is non-eternal; *ihamutatha-bhogaviraga*, the giving up of desire for all objects of enjoyment; *samadamadi-sadhanasampat*; the control of the mind and the development of qualities such as detachment and concentration; and *mumksutva*, an ardent desire for liberation.

Once the student has cultivated these qualities, he or she is eligible to study Vedanta with a teacher. This study has a three-fold component: *sravana*, hearing the teacher's instructions on the *Srutis* (the aforementioned three Vedanta textual sources); *manana*, thinking and reflecting upon them with reason until all doubts are removed; *nididhyasana*, constant and profound meditation on their truths. From these practices, one eventually experiences a transformation of consciousness, which culminates in perceiving the truth of reality as expressed above, namely realization of the Self as one with *Brahman*.



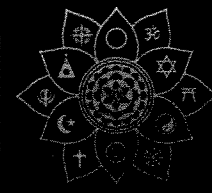
Sri Ramanuja sculpture in a South Indian Sri temple.

For Shankara, other Yoga practices help prepare one for perceiving the non-dual nature of *atma-sakshatkara*, direct perception of the Self. In other words, they have preliminary use for people within conventional, *vyavaharika*, reality. Thus, one should perform *dharmic* actions without desire—worship God, meditate, etc. But once one attains the goal, one transcends *bhakti*, karma, meditative Yoga—in short, any action (even though a liberated soul, *jivanmukta*, may continue with these activities for the welfare of others). After all, let us not forget, from the ultimate perspective, *paramarthika*, there is no world within which to act, and no individual soul to be the actor for Shankara! These practices are like a boat that takes you to the other side; once you reach the shore on the other side, you no longer need the boat.

For Ramanuja and Madhva, however, since God is an individual and real, and so are the souls, then *bhakti* is an eternal interaction between the individual souls and a Supreme individual being. In other words, *bhakti* is eternal, whether performed as a devotional practice for purification and attaining liberation in the material world of *samsara* or performed after attaining liberation in pure love and devotion in the *Brahman* realms of *Vaikuntha* (Vishnu's spiritual abode). *Bhakti* is not just the boat, but the shore on the other side as well! Yoga teachers should at least be aware of these differences irrespective of their own orientations!

Edwin Bryant, Ph.D. taught Hinduism at Harvard University for three years, and is now the professor of Hindu philosophy and Religion at Rutgers University. He has received numerous awards and fellowships, published six books and authored a number of articles on Vedic history, Yoga and the Krishna tradition. His forthcoming translation of and commentary on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (North Point Press, a division of Farrar, Straus & Giroux) will be available in 2008. For more information on Edwin please visit, www.edwinbryant.org.

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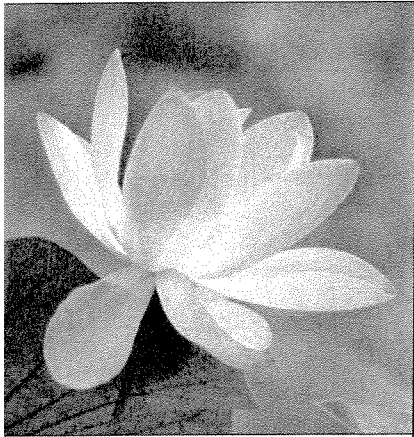


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Sri Gurudev on the banks of the Ganges river in front of Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, India, late 1980s.

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Sri Gurudev places an offering in the Ganges, Haridwar, mid-1980s.

Inside back cover photo:

Sri Gurudev in meditation at the Bhogar Samadhi, Palani Temple, South India, 1986.

Back cover photo:

Sri Gurudev in the Ganges, Rishikesh, early 1980s.