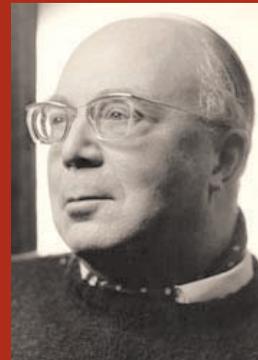


In *The Nature of Man According to the Vedanta*, John Levy determines that the true Self cannot be known. Oddly enough, this is a liberating discovery, as we see that our essence cannot be altered by anything we do or anything that happens to us. This frees us to tackle anything—to jump into the stream of life and enjoy the experience—because at the core of our existence is an untouchable reality. This book is one of the finest expressions of non-dualist philosophy ever written. A must-have for those seeking deeper insight into the essential nature of the human being.



John Levy was a wealthy English mystic, teacher, musician, and artist who gave away his entire fortune and lived for a time in India with nothing. He spent many years there with his guru, Krishna Menon, and then brought his knowledge of Advaita Vedanta to the west in an accessible form. He died in 1976.



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THE NATURE OF MAN ACCORDING TO THE VEDANTA

John Levy



# THE NATURE OF MAN ACCORDING TO THE VEDANTA



*John Levy*

THE NATURE OF MAN  
ACCORDING TO THE VEDANTA

SAMPLE TEXT

First Sentient Publications edition, 2004

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Cover and book design by Nicholas Cummings

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Levy, John, 1910-1976.

The nature of man according to the Vedanta / by John Levy.- 1st Sentient Publications ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-59181-024-8

1. Vedanta. 2. Self (Philosophy) 3. Man (Hinduism) I. Title. B132.V3L4 2004 128-dc22

2004011181

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

SENTIENT PUBLICATIONS

A Limited Liability Company

1113 Spruce St.

Boulder, CO 80302

[www.sentientpublications.com](http://www.sentientpublications.com)

THE NATURE  
OF MAN  
ACCORDING TO THE  
VEDANTA



*John Levy*



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Also by John Levy

*IMMEDIATE KNOWLEDGE AND HAPPINESS (SADY-MUKTI)*

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# *Preface*

## *A Life in Retrospect*

It was in Paris that my real education began.<sup>1</sup> I was nineteen when I went there to be a draughtsman-apprentice to the architect Auguste Perret. He received me in person and at first I was rather awed by his presence, with his bearded dignity, his proud stance to which high heels discreetly lent support, and his manner of speaking like an oracle, full of the consciousness of his achievement. He was, in fact, one of the foremost architects of his time and the first, I believe, to make use of reinforced concrete logically and unashamedly, some will say for good and others for bad. At all events, logic and audacity are in themselves qualities to be admired, and he did much to rid the world of nineteenth-century sham: for that, all lovers of honest building must be grateful. Monsieur Auguste, as we called him, used to sit in his chair facing a photograph of the Parthenon. The remarkable thing was that every design which bore his name could not have come from any other source, although he was never seen to make a single drawing and he left all the details to be worked out by draftsmen, many of whom, like myself, were young men from foreign countries who thought it an honor to be able to work under his direction.

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1. It is uncommon to find an impersonal treatise prefaced by an introduction where the author himself, in the most personal manner, recalls how he was led to the position from which his work derives. When the publishers first proposed it, the idea struck the writer of this work as being quite inapt. But when, further, they strongly urged that its incorporation\* could be of help to those who at present are not engaged in this or in any similar approach to metaphysical realization, to those, in other words, who might wrongly feel themselves to be outsiders, he could not but acquiesce.

\* This appeared as an article in the *Hibbert Journal*, January 1954.

Moreover, since he was his own contractor and employed his own engineers, one had the unique experience of making the architectural designs, the structural drawings and of supervising the work in progress on the building-yards, a combination of aesthetics, theory, mathematics and the purely practical which gave me my first real insight into the underlying unity of all things. That is why I said my real education began in Paris.

My interest in architecture was not such, however, as to make me wish to devote my life to it, and I turned to the study of music, the art with which I have the greatest natural affinity and which has always attracted me more than any other. Like architecture, music is also an art of construction; but being fluid, so to speak, it is a better vehicle for the expression of emotion and intuition. Whilst the time I spent with Perret was a period of intellectual awakening and discipline, the years I spent with the gifted Nadia Boulanger helped me to unite the head and the heart, a movement that almost everyone in our time has to accomplish, since these two are often so tragically divorced.

Amongst the musicians and artists I used to meet, the question of originality was frequently discussed. I began to see that in order to be truly original, one must first go to the very origin of things. It was becoming clear to me that what I was seeking was not a *means* of expression, but the *background of experience* that thoughts and feelings can only inadequately express. All this came home to me when I compared our discordant modern civilization with the more natural order of the old. Most thinking people have made the same comparison, and it was obvious that the splendid products of traditional civilizations, such as the medieval, were intimately connected with spiritual conviction. I wondered how one might recapture this feeling. Empty as much of our modern life is, it is not, certainly, wholly negative. And its more positive qualities and attitudes in which I believed seemed to deny

the beliefs and the attitudes of civilizations which had their foundations in religion and tradition. Though I did later adopt the forms of religious orthodoxy for a specific purpose, I began at first to look for traces of the truth they expressed as distinct from its expression in ritual and dogma. It is unfortunate that most people tend to dismiss the whole spiritual domain simply because they see only its unhappier manifestations in degenerated organized religion. I felt like the Jew in the Decameron, who was converted to Christianity after a visit to Rome where he saw nothing but corruption, and decided that a Church whose spiritual life was so intense, in spite of this depravity at its very centre, must represent a truth far beyond human frailty. I felt that all the great manifestations of religious conviction, such as a Romanesque church or Catholic Mass, pointed to an attainable end. Seeing no reason why I should not also acquire such a certitude, I set about seeking knowledge.

I began to study medieval music, and especially the music of Guillaume de Machaut, for he seemed to be more consciously concerned than his successors with metaphysics. I looked into the symbolism of ancient art and poetry. I also began reading a great many books in the hope of discovering the truth, whatever it might be. I read Greek philosophy in all its variety and found it to be quite unrelated to any present practical possibilities. Occultism and theosophy, both products of our time, while expressing a certain aspiration, lapsed in the end into wistful obscurity, when not into intellectual snobbery; as did also the many other untraditional schools of thought with which the world abounds. I read the works of Ouspensky and was taken to see him: though his writings helped me then, I found later that he only travestied some quite genuine teachings and methods of the East. And then, at last, I was introduced to the writings of René Guénon. I owe to Guénon the sudden understanding that I and the universe

are one and that this essential unity can actually be realized. Now I find much to criticize in his attitude: and, in particular, his statement of Vedanta is often misleading. But his writings opened my eyes then and gave me a foretaste of the truth. His expression, "the Supreme Identity," by which he referred to this essential oneness of the individual soul and the universal soul, struck the deepest chord in my being.

It was this and one other thing that really gave me my direction. That other thing was the need of finding a competent personal guidance, without which absolute knowledge cannot be attained. All virile spiritual traditions have proclaimed this necessity. It is no mere formality nor, as some people think, is it an evasion of one's own responsibility. Lasting spiritual realization of the highest degree has never been observed to come by itself, and cannot in fact do so, because so long as a man believes himself to be a limited individual, the reality which is his essential being will lie hidden. The seeker must therefore be enabled to realize that his essential self, far from being what his individualistic habits of thought would make it seem, is beyond limitation and thus infinite and eternal. Only one who has himself fully realized this can enable another to realize it. Although it was not until I came into contact with a true sage that I could define a spiritual master's function, I had at once an intuitive sense of what it implied, just as I had of what Guénon called the Supreme Identity. From that time onward, the aim of all the different steps I took was to find such a guidance, and I now know that true guidance is synonymous with true knowledge.

My first step was to adopt orthodox Judaism. Let me explain. One of Guénon's most specious ideas was the theory of the fundamental oneness of all orthodox spiritual or religious traditions. He is not alone in this: it has become the fashion. And I notice that Aldous Huxley, for instance, can hardly bring himself to mention one tradition without feeling

obliged to add a list of several others. Anyway, Guénon's theory put every tradition on an equal footing, if not in its present state of survival, at least at its origin. It is important to understand how this over-generous assumption took root in his mind. From the very beginning of his devotion to metaphysics, the Hindu doctrine of Non-Duality or Adwaita had given him his standard of truth. This is not surprising, for there only is the truth unambiguously expressed without its being embroiled in a mass of historical and other irrelevancies. With the bird's-eye view it gives to whomsoever has been able to grasp its implications, one can hardly avoid the tendency to discover, in the statements of the prophets, the saints and the scriptures, revelations of the highest truth, when possibly these statements indicate nothing but a deep intuition; and to see, in the whole paraphernalia of religious art and ritual, conscious symbols of the ultimate reality, when they only show a leaning towards it. There is, moreover, a constant temptation to look for points of comparison between different spiritual doctrines. All this takes one away from the truth itself. At the time, however, I was charmed to find a theory which seemed in a moment to reconcile all differences. Taking it to the letter, I thought that the proper and adequate course to adopt was to return to the religion of my fathers, though I had been brought up liberally in the English public-school tradition, and had passed most of my life as an agnostic. In short, I became an orthodox Jew.

I did so with all my heart, attaching myself to a Rabbinical school, scrupulously following every orthodox precept and enjoying daily conversation with the head of the college, a cheerful and learned man who was descended from a line of Cabbalistic Rabbis. He had been born and brought up in Jerusalem, and was steeped in the atmosphere of this essential Judaism, commonly so misunderstood by Jews and non-Jews alike. Cabbala means literally tradition: it is the oral

transmission of the deep understanding, said to come down directly from Moses, David, Solomon and other prophets. Such knowledge cannot be conveyed by the bare statements of the scriptures. I hoped, by adopting Judaism, that I would find a master in this Cabbala.

With the background acquired from the study of Guénon's writings and, if I may say so, as a result of my own earnest endeavors, the time I spent in this path was anything but a dissipation. It helped me to convert into a single stream the disordered currents of my aspirations. And for the first time in my life I felt myself to be anchored to a changeless principle that I could not as yet fully discern. This may astonish those accustomed to take their knowledge from books. But spiritual knowledge is not theoretical: either it is immediate or else it is no knowledge at all. You can talk to an Eskimo about life in the tropics, but he cannot, without living there, really know what it is.

I learnt many things; and one great intellectual difficulty was partially resolved. I refer to the notion that the universe was created out of nothing by the will of God. As the complete resolution of this difficulty at the end of my search was also largely the means by which I attained certitude, I shall allow myself to expatiate upon it. The notion implies that a self-sufficient, infinite and eternal Principle has desires, an absurdity that no thinking man can honestly admit. And yet, unless he had desires, how could the Supreme Being determine to create a universe? If the universe is a creation, it means that the creator as such is not infinite, for the infinite and the finite cannot together exist.

A close study of the Hebrew text of the Genesis, in the light of Cabbalistic commentaries and with the explanations of my Rabbi, showed me that although the literal meaning is as usually understood, the real meaning goes much deeper. It is not possible for me now to enter upon a word-for-word

explanation of the text, but I can say that there is no suggestion of the world being created out of nothing, or that its creator was God in his highest aspect. This is quite in accordance with the cosmological explanation openly propounded by the lower Vedanta, namely, that the world is an idea in the mind of a personal and conditioned Deity, who has his periods of waking and sleeping, on the analogy of human experience: quite logically so, since he is said to have created man in his own image: and what applies to the one must apply to the other. In the periods of his sleeping, the world-idea enters into latency and ceases to be manifest: it becomes manifest when this conditioned Deity awakens. The physical world as such is therefore nothing but an idea and has no existence apart from its being thought of. Bishop Berkeley expressed the same thing in another way in his famous enunciation that the being of all objects is to be perceived or known. In his zeal to prove the existence of God, however, Berkeley appears to have overlooked the fact that any conception one may form of God as a principle distinct from oneself also comes within the category of objects perceived. It follows from this that the very being of an objectively conceived God is also to be perceived or known. Vedanta, at a higher level, has to face the same problem. It concludes that God as such is not the ultimate reality.

Ultimate reality: these words can hardly mean anything. The ultimate reality, whatever it is, cannot be worded, nor can it be rationalized. What these words express is usually only a hunger which concepts and predicates, even creeds, entirely fail to meet, a hunger that is innate in every enquiring person.

What then is the solution? For my own part I have found it in Non-Dualistic Vedanta, an ancient and evergreen tradition that thrives even today. The approach is subjective and is founded upon an analysis of one's own experience, which is that I-myself, not as an embodied being but as the conscious principle which is the basis of all my experience and all my

knowledge, I-myself, then, am the sole principle I can know certainly to exist: this knowledge is immediate in all men and it requires no proving. As Shankaracharya, who lived in about 800 A.D. and is the best known exponent of Advaita (Non-Duality), says,

Whoever doubts the fact that he himself exists? If you do doubt it, it is still you yourself who doubt it. It is a matter of direct experience that the I is devoid of change, whereas the body is incessantly changing. How then can the body be the self? All persons carry on their respective activities by means of the sense of I-ness or selfhood and the sense of this-ness or objectivity. Of these, the former relates to the inner self and the latter to external objects [like the body, the senses and the mind]. Having understood the meaning of the word, I, to be the pure, transcendental, secondless self that is different from the body, the senses and other objects, no other meaning should be attributed to it. By mistaking the self to be the individual soul, just as, in the dark, a rope is mistaken for a serpent, a man is subject to fear. When he realizes "I am not the individual soul but the supreme self," then he is free from fear. Although the self, being of the nature of consciousness, cannot therefore be the object of consciousness, there can never be a doubt regarding the absolute existence of consciousness itself.

Shankaracharya also describes the state of a man who has risen above fear because he has ceased to identify himself with the body, and this again because he has realized his self as the consciousness in which the ideas of incarnation and objectivity spring up.

Birth, old age, decay and death are of no concern to me, for I am not the body. The world of sound, touch, sight, taste and smell has no connection with me, for I am not the senses. I am not the mind and therefore sorrow, desire, hatred and fear cannot affect me. As declared by the scripture, the self is neither the senses nor the mind: it is unconditioned.

And in a rather different language, the *Bbagavad-Gita*, perhaps the most venerated book in India, gives the following description of a self-realized man.

When a man has found delight and satisfaction and peace in his true self, then he is no longer obliged to perform any kind of action. He has nothing to gain in this world by action, and nothing to lose by refraining from action. He is independent of everybody and everything.

This is, of course, because he no longer identifies himself with his body, which alone acts and which alone can gain or lose. But a literal interpretation might cause people to renounce their activities and their duties. The *Gita* therefore says, "Do your duty, always . . . without anxiety about results." This certainly seems to me to be the only solution: it is exactly the one that we are all blindly seeking in a world where freedom, independence and peace are on everyone's lips. Not very practical, I can almost hear you saying! But I should say that this is the only practical way of attaining real peace and independence. It can never be found in terms of a body that is entirely dependent upon circumstances. As the *Gita* says, "All mankind is born for perfection, and each shall attain it, will he but follow his nature's duty." In this connection, I am reminded of the answer given by a sage to someone who asked

him why he did not go out into the world and preach this truth to all men. "You can cover the earth with leather," he replied, "or you can wear your own shoes."

I have now given some idea of the final position, and there is little purpose in my speaking at length of the several years during which, still in search of genuine guidance, and having adopted the religion of Mohammed, I lived as a Muslim, practiced the rites of orthodox Islam and performed the disciplines, the ritual dances and the meditations of an Order of Sufis, under the direction of a Sheikh. I should explain that what Cabbala is to Judaism, Sufism is to Islam. Now, the characteristic of *all* religions on the level at which they serve the needs of ordinary men is the acceptance of the duality of God and man, though usually there is in their scriptures something that points to a higher truth. In the Old Testament, for example, we repeatedly find the expression, "I am the Lord Thy God"; and in the New, there is the statement of Jesus, "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you." Similar pointers are not wholly lacking in the Quran and are to be found especially in the recorded sayings of the Prophet. Great Sufis like Muhyuddin Ibn Arabi have rightly given them a metaphysical interpretation, although they seldom if ever give arguments to show why the reality is necessarily subjective, a thing Vedantins invariably do, the better to help aspirants to overcome the individualistic habits of thought of which I have previously spoken. But the unseeking Muslim, like the unseeking Jew or Christian, unfortunately has always been firmly wedded to dualism and has often sought to destroy anyone who, having transcended it, has been so bold as to proclaim the fact. The example of Mansur, who was beheaded for declaring, "Ana'l-Haqq—I am the truth," is evidence enough. Al-Haqq, which means literally the truth, is one of the ninety-nine names of Allah, so to a Muslim, "Ana'l-Haqq" means "I am Allah": this is considered to be the most dreadful blasphemy

a man can utter. One may suppose that the possibility of its being true was almost totally ignored. Of course, a man as such cannot be God as such, but the essential reality of God, as distinct from what mankind ascribes to him, cannot be different from the essential reality of a man who has realized his self as that which is beyond all human attributes.

Duality colors the mind of all who are brought up with the Quran as their scripture, and the result of this limitation is that Sufism, which has lost its force and is moribund, at present can offer only a path based on devotion and not upon knowledge, which, if the ultimate reality is to be found, is the necessary complement to the other. It is in many ways parallel to the dualists of India who say they only want to taste the sugar, which stands for the truth, and not to become it. Whereas the very basis of Non-Dualistic Vedanta is that it is impossible to become something you are not already: you have only to become aware of what you actually are, that is to say, absolute consciousness or knowledge when self is viewed from the standpoint of thought, absolute bliss or peace from the standpoint of feelings, and absolute existence from the standpoint of life. Even so, this awareness is not considered by Vedantins to be enough: it is one thing to have recognized your essential being, but what of the world? In Islam, just as there is no real analysis of the self, there is practically none of the world in terms of sensory perception, which in reality constitutes it, as already indicated when I spoke of Berkeley and in the lines of Shankaracharya. In Non-Dualistic Vedanta, this analysis is considered to be quite essential: without it, your experience of the world remains unexplained and complete knowledge is then impossible.

Let it not be thought that I wish to disparage the admirable religion of Islam, for what I have said about its limitations applies equally to all other religions as such. In spite of these deficiencies at the highest level, Islam gave me the most

invaluable help and brought me to the state of heart and mind in which I could receive the pure truth from a great Vedantin. That was in India, several years ago, and my life really began at that moment. Needless to say, because I have passed through so many phases to arrive at a solution, it does not follow that others have to do the same. Perhaps, from one angle, it was necessary that I should have had to pursue such a roundabout path in order the better to assure my fellow-seekers that the truth, in the end, is utterly simple and self-evident. As Shankaracharya says,

The self that is ever-present in all beings appears, through a misconception, to be unattained. But when this wrong knowledge has been destroyed by true knowledge, it is seen always to have been attained, just as after searching everywhere for a necklace, the seeker finds it around his neck.

The verses from the *Bhagavad-Gita* are taken from the translation of Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, published by Phoenix House, London.

The quotations from Shankaracharya are culled and adopted by the author from the several treatises given in the *Select Works of Sri S.*, published by G. A. Natesan and Co., Madras.

PART ONE



THE DISTINCTION OF  
STANDPOINTS  
WAKING, DREAMING, AND  
DREAMLESS SLEEP

## *Introductory Chapter*

### *To Whom Is This Method of Inquiry Addressed?*

The difficulties are immense in writing a book of this nature. Most Hindus have done it in the form of aphoristic verse, easy to memorize but needing interpretation in accordance with the living tradition. That in fact the reader had grown up in it and so would be on intimate terms with the subject they could take for granted until quite recently, when the printing of Vedantic works, and their publication in foreign tongues, at once did away with the old guarantees. As a result, it would be perilous now to presuppose any real familiarity even on the part of serious students, whether Indian or not; and therefore in writing this book, my only assumption has been that its readers seek knowledge of the ultimate truth; and as a rider, that they come with an open mind and the capacity to go beyond the written word. To such kindred souls I address the pages that follow. Therein I have endeavored to give a clear account of the highest Vedanta, known as Adwaita (Non-Duality), without stooping to make any of those compromises attendant upon the childish desire to convert others.

### *The Desire for Happiness*

It cannot be disputed that happiness is the sole aim in life, yet most men would find it hard to agree to this statement without some reservation. What is the fundamental cause of their embarrassment? Is it not that life ends in death and that the prospect of death teems with incertitude? Not all men, of

course, care to think seriously of death, but all men, in normal circumstances, run spontaneously from danger, unless to risk it is their duty or their pleasure. In that case, they have ceased for the moment to identify themselves with the body; and this is what happens to all of us in moments of happiness. Now if we can transcend this false identification unwittingly, can we not do so knowingly? It is the purpose of this book to show that we can, not only from time to time but once and for all. Indeed, we are always and by nature other than the body, for while the body changes continually from birth to death, we who seem to be one with it can observe and remember its modifications. It follows that if, instead of our claiming to be a changeful personality, we could regain our true centre, that immutable, conscious self which observes the personality, we should at once and for ever be happy and peaceful, because we would then know for certain that what affected the body could not affect our self. This, in short, will be the conclusion of our Inquiry.

### *The Three States of Man*

To find a peace and happiness that is beyond every possible circumstance including death, we must be in a position to discern the changeless principle within us. This will entail an examination of human experience as a whole. As human beings, we experience three states, those of waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep, in which all our experience is comprised. But it will not be enough to consider these states from the sole standpoint of waking, as we normally do, for little can be learnt about a whole from the limited standpoint of one of its parts. Accordingly, we shall consider each state from different points of view: from its own, from that which is common to waking and dreaming, and from the one that transcends every state as such. The latter is the standpoint of the real self in

man, the self which continues unmodified throughout the three states, from birth to death, and indeed, beyond birth and death.

## *About the Author*

John Levy was a wealthy English mystic, teacher, musician, and artist who was an expert in Asian folk music and hosted a radio program about this subject on the BBC. At one point in his life Levy decided to give away his entire fortune and go to live for a time in India with nothing. He spent many years there with his guru, Krishna Menon, assisting him with the English translations of his guru's books *Atma Darshan* and *Atma Niviriti*.

Levy then brought his knowledge of Advaita Vedanta to the west in an accessible form through his teaching work and the publication of his books. He died in London in 1976.

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