

[Deepak Chopra: Vedantic Evangelist](#)

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PEOPLE

## Deepak Chopra: Vedantic Evangelist

Meet the man who's introduced the best of the East to the West-and made a fortune in the process

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[lassiwithlavina.com](http://lassiwithlavina.com)

He's the vedantic sage who's a mouse click away ([www.chopra.com](http://www.chopra.com)). But is he the Wise Man from the East or just a savvy communicator who's capitalized on the West's fascination with Indian spirituality? Dr. Deepak Chopra is probably the most famous Indian living in the West, and just about everyone knows of the High Priest of Health and Happiness whose tapes, books and seminars have wrought a multimillion-dollar empire--estimated in a 1997 Newsweek article to bring in <sup>us</sup>\$15 million a year. According to Chopra's web site, during his recent India visit, US President Bill Clinton said in one speech, "My country has been enriched by the contributions of more than a million Indian Americans, which includes Dr. Deepak Chopra, the pioneer of alternative medicine." Chopra's latest is a book titled How to Know God: The Soul's Journey into the Mystery of Mysteries, which reflects this modern-day mystic's own journey.

As I interviewed him for this article, it was hard to believe that this promoter of the Vedanta was once a physician practicing Western medicine. The son of a prominent cardiologist in India, Chopra had taught at Tufts University and Boston University Schools of Medicine and was the chief of staff at the New York Memorial Hospital. But even in medical school, there were signs of his destiny. His father, Col. Krishan Lal Chopra, told Hinduism Today correspondent Prabha Prabhakar Bhardwaj in Delhi, "At medical school he became unhappy with his professor's attitude. Deepak said, 'They only talk of disease and misery and never talk of health. How can they describe some patient's pain and misery as an 'interesting and fascinating case?' "A meeting with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the 80's was influential in turning him towards Ayurveda.

Eventually he parted company with Maharishi and today is the chairman of the Chopra Center for Well Being in La Jolla, California. With charismatic presentation and astute marketing, Chopra has made the ancient sciences of Ayurveda, yoga and meditation user-friendly to the American mainstream. He's appeared on countless

prime-time shows, like Oprah, reaching a vast audience yearning for preventive measures that treat not only the body but also the soul. His scores of books, including *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, have been on the best-seller list and have been translated into 35 languages.

He's been criticized for "repackaging" traditional Indian teachings, but Lynn Franklin, an author familiar with both India and Chopra, responded, "I'm surprised some Indian friends will criticize him because he is teaching esoteric principles they consider well known. I think in fact this is his greatest gift, that he can make them effective for people who would normally not find them accessible, and in so doing he can help them change their lives."

Lucy Kawaihalau, a neighbor of Hinduism Today in Hawaii and owner of Kauai Vacation Rentals, echoed Franklin's sentiment and said Chopra seminars in San Diego, Colorado and Goa, India, changed her life. "He's absolutely brilliant, able to bring together all the teachings from all the ancient teachers into present-day language. He

has access to incredible creativity. It's really magical being around him, and a lot of fun, too. People in his groups go on to do meaningful things in their life as a result of being there. For me, his concept of 'living in the present and embracing uncertainty' brought a lot of inner peace. His seminar on dharma caused me to realize my service to the world was to specialize in vacation rentals, and that decision has brought joy and happiness in my life. He's also a good model in his private life, with his family and personal disciplines. I am truly honored to have spent time with him one on one. I think he is a real gift to the world."

Having achieved so much materially, it is perhaps natural that Chopra would ponder next about achieving the seemingly unachievable--God. His new book is the result of many years of research and thought and is the logical conclusion of a search began when he was six years old. He remembers a day when he and his three-year-old brother were living in India with his grandfather while his parents were in England. "My grandfather took us to see 'Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves' at the Odeon, then out for dinner and to

buy some toys," recalls Chopra. "He let us stay up late, which was very unusual for us. Then in the middle of the night we heard screaming and wailing--my grandfather had died. I asked everyone where he had gone and nobody had any answer. I was totally devastated, and so was my little brother. We didn't know what had happened. How could you have someone who takes you to 'Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves,' and the next day comes back in a bowl of ashes which then is dispersed in the Ganges and is gone?"

He says that he went to medical school to find the answers to these perplexing questions. Over the years that spiritual quest is undiminished, and the questions are the ones that all human beings ponder at one time or another. Who are we, what do we really want? Where do we come from? What happens after we die? Chopra is the first to admit that no one knows the definite answers: "As one grows older, one realizes it's easy to get lost in habitual certainties. In fact, even as I look back on my earlier books I think I was much more definitive in what I wrote, and now it's getting more into progressive proliferation of uncertainty."

He, however, does believe that Vedanta, Hinduism's rich body of literature, provides the most satisfying answers. "I find that Vedanta, of all great traditions, does have a framework that I can come to terms with as a person who thinks that science is the most legitimate way of understanding the secrets of nature." In this new book, Chopra delves deeply into Vedanta and combines it with his knowledge of the sciences to provide a map for spiritual evolution.

Chopra, who was born a Hindu, makes a distinction between Vedanta and Hinduism. Would he juxtapose the two words? Says Chopra, "Most people would easily substitute one word for the other--my bias is that when we start saying Hinduism, I, at least, start thinking of rituals and certain ideological framework and the Manu Smriti which is a book of rules and regulations. I regard Hinduism as a religion. And I regard Vedanta as the source which inspired Hinduism, and when I say Vedanta, I mean particularly that body of literature which we call the Upanishads." In a 1997 interview with Rashmi Uday Singh published in India, he said he is "not at all religious."

Chopra particularly emphasizes the Bhagavad Gita, which he calls one of the gemstones of the Vedantic tradition. "So, obviously there is a great overlap, but the reason why I like to use the term Vedanta is that it refers immediately to one particular body of Hindu literature, whereas Hindu literature includes other bodies of literature--all of which have a wealth to offer."

Does he consider himself a Hindu? Chopra neatly sidesteps the issue, saying, "You know--as soon as you label yourself, you confine yourself. I would say I was born a Hindu, that I draw my inspiration from Vedanta, which is the eternal source of wisdom that Hinduism comes from."

Chopra recalls a saying, sometimes attributed to J. Krishnamurthy, that God gave humans the truth and the devil came and offered, "I'll organize it for you and call it religion." He points out that all the religions offer truth, but the moment each proclaims their way to be the only way, problems arise: "From the beginning of time into present-day civilization--whether it's ethnic cleansing in Kosovo or in Sri Lanka--if there's been

bloodshed, it's been into the name of God, and it's been in the name of a fragmented God, not a God of wholeness, not a God of nonduality. That's why Vedanta is attractive to me."

While Chopra may not call himself a Hindu, he believes rituals have a place in his daily life because they are a way to trap energy and information. He observes, "A ritual done with proper quality of consciousness, with a proper quality of attention, and done with internal reference does remarkable things. I do believe in rituals--I make a trip once a year to Haridwar and Rishikesh just to participate in the rituals."

Chopra believes that Vedanta is important to the future of science. "Most scientists are brought up in an old worldview, and that worldview is now obsolete and it's going to be overthrown," he observes. "It takes a few generations for a new worldview to emerge." According to him, scientists are either unfamiliar with this whole realm of nonlocal reality or they are so uncomfortable with it that they pretend it doesn't exist. He explains, "There's a transcendent, spaceless, timeless,

dimensionless order of being that orchestrates all the energy and information in the universe. It doesn't matter what you call it--nonlocal mind, Brahman, God--but science is telling us that it exists."

He recounts the episode from the Bhagavad Gita where Lord Krishna tells Arjuna about the nature of the soul--that water cannot wet it, wind cannot dry it, fire cannot burn it, nor weapons shatter it. It is spaceless, dimensionless and timeless. It is unborn, it doesn't die. Says Chopra, "That's the best possible description that you can have of the nonlocal domain, Brahman, or God."

Yet if one lives according to the Vedanta, believing that the entire world is an illusion how would the Wall-Street wizards and the "dotcom" millionaires thrive? How can they cope once they know that all their millions are an illusion? Chopra laughs, "Once you know that it's an illusion and that you create the illusion, you can have a lot more fun. All these people who are trying to be successful, they measure their success in only one way--the acquisition of things that are not going

to last very long anyway."

He points out that material success is necessary because if you don't have it you'll be thinking about it all the time. But it is just one ingredient in his mantra for real success which includes the progressive expansion of happiness, the ability to have love and compassion, the capacity for innate joy and the ability to spread it to others. It also includes a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and the progressive realization of worthy goals--and that includes material acquisitions. If you make those the criteria for success, then you'll be very successful and you won't get hypertension and heart attacks--these are modern epidemics of disease caused by a very fragmented view of success.

Chopra observes, "There's only one kind of poverty and that's spiritual poverty. If you have spiritual poverty, then you'll be unsuccessful. You can be very rich, but if all you think about is money then you are very poor. Wealth and poverty are states of mind."

How does he separate his celebrity from his journey of the soul? "I have a wife and kids who constantly remind me and humble me as to who I am by not taking me seriously," he says. He married his wife Rita when he was just finishing medical school, and they have been married for 30 years. The couple live in San Diego where Rita supervises the staff of one hundred at the Chopra Center for Well Being in La Jolla. Says Chopra, "My wife is the source of all the energy that we have, including the kids. We are just the happiest couple in the world."

His daughter Mallika and son-in-law Sumant are both students in business school at Kellogg, and Mallika is also collaborating with Chopra on his new website. Mallika told correspondent Prabha Bhardwaj, "My father was trying out new techniques, so he would try them out on us. Gautama and me were treated like guinea pigs. For example, I used to eat a lot of chocolates and was trying to give these up, so he hypnotized me to achieve my goal." Son Gautama has already become somewhat of a celebrity as a talk show host on Channel 1, a TV show that reaches ten million teenagers with a direct feed to high

schools.

"I think the greatest thing one can do for children is tell them great stories based on great mythology with great lessons," says Chopra. "When you lose touch with the stories of your culture, you lose your soul. Indian-American families should really revive the mythology here. Mythology is the basis of nurturing and sustenance. One of the reasons we have a spiritually bankrupt society is that there is no mythology apart from Star Trek. What we've done is replace heroes with celebrities so there's confusion and the word celebrity is synonymous in many people's minds with heroes."

With his multimillion-dollar empire, does Chopra ever feel he's got to give something back? He says, "I've generated lots of wealth but never kept it. I don't believe in clinging to anything. All I've done is put it back into creating more means to proliferate what I'm doing." About a year ago he started the Shankaracharya Peace Foundation to encourage the study of Vedanta in India. He says, "The help worth giving is the help that makes

people independent of your help--education, scholarships and sending people to schools where they can unfold their potential to contribute to society."

Chopra has developed [www.mypotential.com](http://www.mypotential.com), a website which explores human potential in health, spirituality, love and success, all intricately interconnected fields. An important part of it is an ambitious plan to trickle some of the wealth to the impoverished: a credit card which will be issued by Chopra's website by which users can channel one percent of everything they spend into their giving account and the website will monitor the account and identify for them charities worldwide where they can donate the amount.

Asked what he would say to people who were skeptical about his motives, Chopra replied with a touch a sarcasm: "Remain skeptical. Cynical mistrust is the number-one risk factor for premature death from cardiovascular disease." More

seriously, he said, "If you want to do something positive, you cannot worry about critics or flatterers."

Indeed, over the last few years there have been some uncomfortable and embarrassing moments for him, such as the 1996 claim of a liaison with Chopra by former prostitute Judy Bangert. She retracted her story after Chopra sued her. The Weekly Standard, the magazine which ran the story, issued an abject apology, reportedly paying Chopra over <sup>US</sup> \$1 million to settle. And he ultimately prevailed in a complex related case involving a former coworker, Joyce Weaver. She accused him of sexual harassment, among other things; he accused her of attempting to blackmail him. To his credit, Chopra was fully exonerated in both cases. He said in an

interview: "I look at these people as hyenas after my blood and marrow just because they think I have money."

What gets him through such ups and downs of living? "I remind myself that everything is as it should be--including the rough times," says Chopra. "I remind myself that God is sending a deep karmic lesson here, and whatever the rough episode is, it's meant to take me to the next level. It's taken me a long time to realize that, but every adversity, every disaster, every rough episode is a message in love from God."

Author Lavina Melwani, a popular free-lance correspondent, was born in Sindh, grew up in New Delhi and has lived in Hong Kong and Africa. She currently resides in New York with her husband and two children.

Deepak in Print

Chopra's 25 books have sold over ten million copies in English alone, and he's produced more than 100 audio, video and CD ROM titles. Here's a short overview of his bestsellers:

Perfect Health; Ageless Body,  
Timeless Mind (325 pages,

Harmony Books, us\$14.00). At more than one million copies and counting, this is Chopra's best selling book. It provides a program of diet, stress reduction, exercises and daily routines based on the principles of India's ayurveda medical system. The power of "quantum healing" is invoked to transcend disease and aging.

The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success (115 pages, Amber-Allen Publications, \$15.00). An excerpt: "There are three components to the Law of Least Effort--three things you can do to put this principle of 'do less and accomplish more' into

action. The first component is acceptance. Acceptance simply means that you make a commitment: 'Today I will accept people, situations, circumstances and events as they occur.'

The Return of Merlin (422 pages, Fawcett Books, \$12.95). Deepak's foray into fiction with this present-day rendering of the story of Camelot, King Arthur and Merlin the magician was issued to mixed reviews--"crumbles under the weight of its thematic baggage" was one evaluation. One reader who posted their comments on Amazon.com found it "very

un-Chopra like," another recommended he "not give up his day job." Still, the book has sold well.

The Path to Love (338 pages, Harmony books, \$24.00). Chopra fans were quite pleased with this book and its practical advice on relationships. One reader credited it with saving her marriage. An excerpt: "Two spiritual people living together don't automatically make a spiritual relationship. Therefore, we want to ask in practical terms how love increases between two souls. The ego is not easily defeated in its preoccupation with

everything but love."