

The Milk of Wisdom

Three Sources of Vedanta and the Flowering of Self-Knowledge

James Traverse | Being Yoga

Vedanta and the Question of What You Are

The value of a teaching is in the understanding it makes possible. A book can give us words, distinctions and questions; its purpose is fulfilled as a mistaken understanding is seen and released. In Being Yoga, this flowering is self-knowledge: wisdom that includes and transcends intellectual knowledge.

Vedanta means the end or culmination of the Vedas. It names the Upanishadic teaching and the traditions that interpret it. Here, culmination points toward inquiry into the truth of the Self and the reality of all that appears. My teaching is grounded in Advaita Vedanta: the recognition of not-two.

Vedic ritual, contemplative practice and self-inquiry have distinct roles. We need not dismiss ritual or devotion to appreciate the inquiry of the Upanishads. The question becomes immediate: what does the word “I” truly refer to?

The Upanishads: Teaching the Truth of the Self

The Upanishads are the foundational teaching texts of Vedanta. Traditionally received as shruti, they use dialogue, imagery and inquiry to unfold the relationship between Atman and Brahman. They are more than records of unusual spiritual experiences.

Atman names your true nature, the Self. Brahman names limitless Reality. In Advaita, Atman is Brahman: the two terms approach the same undivided reality from different teaching standpoints. The difference in naming does not create a difference in Awareness.

The texts invite examination of what is ordinarily taken for granted. The body is known. Thoughts, memories and feelings are known. Do their changing attributes exhaust the meaning of what you are? The teaching helps reveal the error involved in taking the limitations of these appearances to define the Self.

Teaching as Nourishment

The Bhagavad Gita: The Milk of Wisdom

A traditional verse in the Gita Dhyana likens the Upanishads to cows, Krishna to the milker and the Bhagavad Gita to their nourishing milk. This is a teaching metaphor: the Gita unfolds Upanishadic wisdom through a conversation in the midst of human difficulty.

Arjuna's question arises where many of our questions arise: in action, relationship, uncertainty and responsibility. The Gita brings self-knowledge into dialogue with how a person lives. Karma Yoga, devotion, meditation and inquiry belong within this larger teaching.

In an Advaita reading, action and contemplative practice prepare the mind for understanding, while self-knowledge removes ignorance of the Self. The milk metaphor reminds us that teaching is nourishment to be assimilated. Repeating a sentence about freedom is different from understanding what it reveals.

The Brahma Sutras: Reasoning in Service of Understanding

The Brahma Sutras organize and examine the teaching of the Upanishads in concise aphorisms. Their brevity makes commentary and careful study important. They consider apparent conflicts, alternative interpretations and questions about Brahman, the world and liberation.

Reasoning has a vital role in clarifying meaning and resolving doubt. In Advaita, it works with the teaching; abstract argument by itself does not turn Awareness into an object we can discover. Intellectual clarity serves self-knowledge.

Consider the statement that the world is *mithya*. Calling it simply "false" can suggest that experience is meaningless or nonexistent. *Mithya* means that what is experienced has no independent existence apart from its basis. A wave has a recognizable form and movement, yet no existence apart from water. The image invites inquiry into dependence and non-separateness.

Likewise, "I am not merely the body-mind" need not imply a separate spirit hidden inside the body. It invites examination of the assumed identity between the Self and the changing attributes of what is known.

An Overview of Vedanta

Three Sources, One Field of Inquiry

The Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahma Sutras are known together as the Prasthanatraya, the three foundational sources of Vedanta. The Upanishads are the shruti foundation; the Gita is the smriti foundation; the Sutras provide systematic examination and reasoning.

These are complementary roles rather than three isolated kinds of knowledge. The Gita also reasons and teaches the Self; the Upanishads also address living and contemplation. Together they provide a rich field for listening, reflection and understanding.

Different Vedanta Traditions

Vedanta includes traditions with substantive differences in how they understand the individual, the world and Brahman. The following is an introductory map, not an account of all Hindu philosophy.

Advaita, strongly associated with Shankara, teaches the identity of Atman and Brahman and the dependent status of the world. Vishishtadvaita, associated with Ramanuja, teaches a qualified unity in which selves and the world depend upon Brahman and are understood as Brahman's body.

Dvaita, associated with Madhva, affirms real distinctions between God, individual selves and the world. Dvaitadvaita, associated with Nimbarka, teaches difference and non-difference. Shuddhadvaita, associated with Vallabha, teaches pure non-dualism with its own account of manifestation. Gaudiya Vaishnava teaching expresses inconceivable difference and non-difference, Achintya Bhedabheda.

Their differences deserve careful study in their own terms. My standpoint here is Advaita. Describing the traditions as different "flavours" can introduce variety, but it should not imply that their philosophical claims are interchangeable.

Understanding Lived

From Study to Being Understanding

Listening-Feeling and reasoning can support one another. Feel the body resting. Hear a sound. Notice a thought about yourself. Then inquire into the assumption that this thought is a complete account of what you are. Openness allows an assumption to become evident; reflection helps clarify what has been seen.

I first heard the expression “Being Understanding” from my teacher, Jean Klein. I use it to point to understanding inseparable from being: wisdom expressed in living. The aim of study is not to accumulate an impressive account of the Self, nor to preserve a special spiritual experience.

It is the nature of an error to cease once seen. Self-knowledge concerns the removal of misidentification and abiding as what has never been absent. The recognition does not create Atman or Brahman. What you truly are and how you appear are not-two.

The milk of wisdom is assimilated as understanding flowers in listening, relationship and responsible action. Yoga is the flowering of Being Understanding: the wholeness already present becomes evident as the error that veils it is seen and released.

Listen with your whole being.

What you truly are and how you appear are not-two.

Continue the inquiry

My Teaching

The Four Yogas

The Four Mahavakyas

About the Brahma Sutra - IIT Kanpur Gita Supersite

The milk metaphor is drawn from the traditional Gita Dhyana verses. This introductory account presents the teaching standpoint of Advaita; the other traditions deserve study in their own terms.