

# SOVEREIGN SELF

Claim Your Inner Joy and Freedom  
with the Empowering Wisdom  
of the Vedas, Upanishads,  
and Bhagavad Gita

ACHARYA  
SHUNYA

# CONTENTS

Introduction: An Invitation to the Sovereign Self . . . 1

## PART I RECOGNIZE THAT YOU ARE SOVEREIGN

---

- 1 Atman: The Self Awaits Your Discovery . . . 11
- 2 Maya: The Illusion That Conceals Your True Self . . . 19  
*Guided Practice: The One Truth . . . 35*
- 3 Samsara: The Virtual Prison of the Suffering Mind . . . 37
- 4 Raga: Breaking the Cycle of Attachment . . . 47  
*Guided Practice: Practicing Wholeness, Reducing Attachment . . . 57*
- 5 Vasana: Healing Our Restless Relationship with Desire . . . 61
- 6 Manoshuddhi: Shining the Light of Consciousness . . . 83
- 7 Vijyoga: Cultivating Detachment from Possessions and People . . . 105
- 8 Guru: Recognizing a True Teacher . . . 119

## PART II TOOLS TO UNMASK YOUR SOVEREIGNTY

---

- 9 Sakshi: Cultivating Your Inner Witness . . . 141  
*Guided Practice: Witnessing . . . 147*
- 10 Dhyanam: Meditating on the Inner Self for Inner Freedom . . . 153  
*Guided Practice: Acharya Shunya's Sovereignty Meditation Method . . . 156*  
*Guided Practice: Belly Breathing . . . 158*

## Contents

- Guided Practice: Jnana Mudra Meditation* . . . 160
- Guided Practice: The Unchangeable Nature of Self* . . . 160
- Guided Practice: Peace Without Reason Meditation* . . . 162
- Guided Practice: Acceptance Meditation* . . . 163
- Guided Practice: My Lineage's Nondual  
Meditation—Atmabodha Dhyanam* . . . 166
- 11 Viveka: Walking the Path of Discernment . . . 171
- Guided Practice: Viveka—Conduct an Intelligent Inquiry in the Pause* . . . 187
- 12 Vairagyam: Practicing Nonattachment . . . 191
- Guided Practice: Decoloring Contemplation* . . . 199
- Guided Practice: Cultivating Nonattachment* . . . 203
- 13 Shama: Managing Your Thoughts—Really . . . 205
- Guided Practice: A Contemplation for a Sattvic Mind* . . . 217
- 14 Bhawashuddhi: Cultivating Emotional Intelligence . . . 223
- Guided Practice: Diffuse Negative Emotions* . . . 237
- 15 Nitya-Anitya: Meeting Impermanence and Death . . . 239
- 16 Advaita: Recognizing the Truth of Unity Consciousness . . . 253

## PART III

### EMBRACE THE JOY OF YOUR SOVEREIGN LIFE

- 17 Dharma: Cultivating a Life of Meaning . . . 275
- 18 Yamas and Niyamas: Nurturing Higher Values . . . 289
- Guided Practice: Adopt a Dharma Value* . . . 306
- 19 Swadharma: Embracing Your Innate Purpose with Integrity . . . 309
- 20 Atmashakti: Bringing Soul Power to Relationships . . . 325
- Guided Practice: Soul-Powered Thoughts for the End of a Relationship* . . . 334
- 21 Vaaktapas: Employing Ancient Communication Protocols . . . 339
- Guided Practice: The Practice of Silence* . . . 349

Contents

- 22 Samatvam: Cultivating Equanimity by Accepting What Is Arising . . . 353
- 23 Moksha: Making Awakening Your Supreme Goal . . . 369  
*Guided Practice: Sadhana Chatustayam—Classical Fourfold Discipline to Purify the Ego and Prevent Spiritual Bypassing . . . 377*
- 24 Atmabodha: Knowing the Sovereign Self . . . 387
- Glossary of Sanskrit Words . . . 391
- Bibliography of Vedic Texts . . . 399
- Notes . . . 401
- Index . . . 409
- Acknowledgments . . . 429
- About the Author . . . 431

PART I



# Recognize That You Are Sovereign



# 1



## Atman: The Self Awaits Your Discovery

*“Aapnoti sarvam iti Atman . . . That which is boundless is who you are, Self.”*

ADI SHANKARACHARYA, *TATTVA BODHA*

The human mind is not an ordinary intelligence. You are not equipped with a mind merely to help you survive as an “evolved animal” as evolutionary biologists would have you believe. Mind is an extraordinary awareness-intelligence, a reflector of divine powers of your soul.

Behind the ordinary mind is the real power, a universally pervading intelligence, a transcendental, divine, all-knowing existence that I call the Self with a capital S. Self is akin to spirit in the trio of body, mind, and spirit; it is the divine power that illumines everything and everyone but is itself invisible.

In the poetic *Chandogya Upanishad*, we find a dialogue between a sage and his disciple son on who we truly are.<sup>1</sup>

The father beckons his son: “Bring me a fruit of that banyan tree.”

“Here you go, Father.”

“Break it.”

“Okay, I have broken it, Father.”

“What do you see there?”

“I see tiny seeds, Father.”

“Break one seed open.”

“Alright, I have broken a seed, Father.”

“What do you see there?”

“I see nothing, Father.”

His father said: “From that nothingness, my dear, grows this whole banyan tree. Believe me, my dear; all that exists comes from the Self, which is invisible (appears as no-thing). That is real. That is the Self. You are that, dear one.”

The father continued: “You see nothing in the seed, but everything resides in that seed. This big banyan tree cannot emerge from nothingness. Only you cannot see that subtlest of subtle ‘somethingness’—life-enabling Self!

“It is Self that resides inside the seed, from which has sprung forth this enormous tree. That invisible power pervades everywhere and everything. It is all of existence. It appears as nothing to you since it is subtle, so your senses and mind cannot grasp it, but that does not mean Self does not exist. Believe me, my dear; all that exists arises from Self, which is the invisible but ultimate reality. You are that Self, dear one.”

Your Self, too, is hidden like the intrinsic emptiness buried inside the seed. Since your Self is not material, you are unaware of it. You cannot know it via your senses. Being spiritual, it is unavailable for gross or subtle perception. Yet it pervades your entire being as supremely intelligent self-awareness, so you can know it in your pure, self-aware mind.

When the seed is broken, it reveals an invisible fullness, a pregnant emptiness, the potent essence and life that in time can spawn an entire forest. As we recognize and work through the different layers covering the true Self, we will begin appreciating its presence, an all-powerful life-force within. Self is pure consciousness that animates and enlivens the body and mind, and yet it continues to survive and exist even after the body ends, just like an ocean continues to exist even if a wave ends. It is like how the substratum of clay continues to exist even if a pot fashioned from that clay breaks or how electricity continues to exist even if the bulb breaks.

If this is the first time you are encountering the teachings on soul as pure consciousness, you may be surprised by the sheer boldness of the Vedic vision in recognizing what is immortal, divine, all-powerful, and ever blissful inside you.

If you really think about it, however, all the wonderful attributes you assign to your mind, like intelligence, awareness, power, joy, wholeness, love, and clarity, don’t originate in the mind. The mind only appears intelligent because there is a super-intelligent consciousness or “Self” behind it.

*You use your mind, but you are not your mind, ego, or intellect.*

The body is beautiful—a vessel of sexual, physical, and vital strength. It can move, digest, even reproduce, and enjoy itself through its five senses in the world of sensorial delights, yet the source of life behind this living body is the invisible Self.

*You inhabit your body, but you are not your body.*

The Self is self-luminous, self-revealing, and self-evident and endows the mind with its existence, powers, and function.

You are indeed *pure consciousness*—sinless, sparkling, ageless, timeless, immeasurable, pure-bliss consciousness that animates your body and mind, but is never circumscribed, defined, or confined by your body or mind.

Though in ordinary parlance we say we must awaken to who we are as if Self were a goal to be reached, you are already that beautiful, blissful, powerful, and eternally whole presence. You don't have to become anything new; you simply must remember who you (already) are. Upon rediscovering or reclaiming the forgotten Self, a deep sense of belonging, purpose, and well-being takes over.

This Self is called “Atman,” a Sanskrit word meaning “that which is boundless.”

Your true Self, the Vedas say, is boundless existence, unchanging consciousness, abiding bliss. It shines as the eternal light within your heart. In fact, your mind depends on the boundless Self for its intelligent awareness, and the body depends on it for life, as it is Self that makes the body sentient.

*You are the Self.*

*You are eternal.*

*You are unchanging.*

*You are ever pure.*

*You are ever free.*

The Self does not age, no matter what the age of the body. Self is never tired, worried, confused, or lost, even if your mind is tired and worried. Self is forever the possessor of complete wisdom and bliss, even if your mind is clouded temporarily or your happiness feels blocked.



Seemingly by default, we are disconnected from our own inner spiritual dimension and live submersed in the outer, material world as material bodies with material names and material addresses, enjoying our material objects (people and things) that we possess and covet. This is the root cause of human suffering.

Deep down in your mind, masked by your thoughts, lies your implicit identification with the Infinite.

*But you have forgotten the infinite presence in you and  
are caught up in fretting over the finite.*

Yes, your mind, the gateway to the palace of your true, amazing, and infinite Self, has been overrun by myriad worldly details. Its walls are rotting with stuck feelings, its windows are sealed shut by sorrowful memories, and its every inch is taken over by your virtual possessions, relationships, losses, and fears. The slew of likes and dislikes, the glue of attachments and aversions, and the acid of rage and resentment have locked you out from meeting, knowing, and enjoying your own unbelievable destiny to be truly happy, truly peaceful, and truly sovereign! We lose our self-governance when our sense of identity remains fused with a changeable shadowy mind that picks up cues from society and follows its dictates. This forever-fluctuating and naturally fearful mind only knows bondage. It is not free in any sense, nor steadfast, and therefore neither fearless nor powerful.

*Indeed, when identified with the mind, the Self appears other  
than what it is—finite. But know this: the Self is infinite.*

Here is the good news.

When you begin questioning and probing your mind—when you ask: “Is this it? Or is there more to find out about me?” when you lighten, cleanse, and purify your mind with the aid of the wisdom tools that I share in part II—you will be able to pierce the veils of the mind and enter the realm of a divine, transcendent, infinitely powerful, and beautiful Self, which is of the nature of Divine Consciousness. What up to now has been veiled from you will be unmasked. You will be blessed with wholeness from within!

The Self is worth pursuing, as the well-being that comes from aligning with it is incomparable to even the highest form of joy in the material universe.

A particle of its bliss supplies the bliss of the whole universe. It illuminates everything. The knower of the Self revels in an ecstasy that is indescribable, pure bliss, incomparable, transcending time, ever free, and beyond desire.

## You Are the Happiness You Seek

Once a king built a palace of mirrors and kept a beautiful blooming rose at its center. The mirrors enhanced the beauty of the rose. Then he set a pigeon free in the palace. Seeing the numerous reflections of the rose, the pigeon was attracted to them and began pecking at each mirror. Crashing into the mirrors, it only hurt its beak each time. Instead of finding happiness, it became more sorrowful, since what it was seeking was only a mirage, not the truth. But it would not give up.

Finally, exhausted with the fluttering about, it lost desire to look for the rose and collapsed, landing on the real rose. At last it was satisfied.

Our search for happiness is the same. According to the Vedas, bliss is something we bring with us to this life and take forward with us to other lives we may have in future because bliss lives inside us. It is always within us because bliss is the true state of the Self (though our mental state in each moment determines whether we feel it or not). That is why the Bhagavad Gita says: "One who is happy within, who rejoices within, who is illuminated within, that seeker attains absolute freedom and achieves the Self."<sup>2</sup>

Although bliss is within, we keep searching for it in the enchanting mirage of external objects. However, our own blissful Self is the rose that we seek. A vast multitude of bliss is stored within us, known as *ananda* in Sanskrit. You can say Self and bliss are interchangeable. Pure bliss, *ananda*, will arise in the river of the Self because blissful is the nature of Self.

Ananda is beyond the realm of the senses and beyond the understanding of your mind or possession of your ego because this bliss is your own innermost nature. In fact, whenever the senses are turned inward through meditation or self-contemplation, *ananda* quietly reveals itself from within.

That is why *ananda* does not require any external pleasure-giving object for its existence. It can exist despite sorrowful circumstances too. It does not wane with time, unlike sensory pleasures. In fact, it keeps growing and expanding to overflow and fill our homes, communities, and the hearts of people

we encounter. We are joyful in the company of people who are in touch with their inner ananda.

No wonder the ancient seers exclaim with conviction: “For Self alone causes abiding bliss.”<sup>3</sup> And the Bhagavad Gita says, “An awakened one has become free from a self-ignorant mind, and as a result, enjoys contact with bliss of Self.”<sup>4</sup>

We seem to prize happiness or joy over and above everything. Yet, we are rightly skeptical of people who say they can show the way to happiness. But here is what I want to tell you: when we stop chasing mirages outside of ourselves, bliss is self-revealing. A baby, free from desires after having fed at the breast of its mother, lies in bed enjoying its own natural bliss. Any time one of us is free of desires and happy with what is coming to us in natural course, we become bliss personified. Bliss is the very nature of Self. Ananda and Atman are never apart from each other. A continuous state of joy emerges from spiritual existence.

Bliss of Self is not attached to an object or experience, as in, “When I eat chocolate cake, I am in bliss,” or “When my lover says they love me, I feel happy.” What will happen when the cake is finished and the lover decides that they do not love me after all?

Vedic scripture informs us that we are the source of the happiness that we seek, that our very nature is *boundless happiness, fullness, peace, and bliss*. When one’s basic nature is of happiness, having a *desire* to be happy is itself ignorance and the beginning of *unhappiness*. When the desire to be happy ends, that is where happiness lies.

The only problem is that we do not know we have forgotten our inner treasures!

## The Misguided Search Outside

Being part of a sleepwalking or unconscious society populated with non-sovereign minds conditions us, from childhood, to seek happiness outside of ourselves.

You see, ever since you forgot your nature, which is self-fulfilled, self-content, and radically happy, and became solely identified with your perishable body and ephemeral pleasures in a world marked by impermanence, you have looked for yourself and your happiness in ice-cream cones, orgasms, hugs, handbags and pretty clothes, approval and positive strokes, classy furniture and cutlery,

diamond necklaces, promotions, relationships, pets, and pretty much anything that can give even an iota of happiness.

Have you found your happiness yet?

I think not. Sadly, we all feel that our happiness is one partner, one job, or one more well-completed project away. Therefore, the enslaved, sleepwalking mind seeks drugs, alcohol, sex, relationships, et cetera, to get that happiness. The temporary happiness the mind experiences with each of these eventually fades. Then our mind experiences its opposite, sorrow and insecurity.

Naturally, these misperceptions only arise in a mind that has not been exposed to the truth of its inherent happy nature and how to internally align with it. So, egged on by our own ignorant minds, off we go, chasing yet more ephemeral happiness . . . and losing touch with our inner happiness along the way.

But Vedic wisdom reassures us that the Self is always there. This never changes, and it alone is our source for abiding security, wholeness, and happiness. In fact, it is the only constant.

A sovereign mind is always happy because happiness is a state of Self. A mind that is no longer seeking fulfillment and happiness in the world but sources them from within, by knowledge of its divine origins and its connection with Universal Intelligence, is a sovereign mind because it is established in its own fullness. Such a mind feels radically content, even while we live our routine lives.

Once we are convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that happiness and wholeness are our own essential nature, then we make the search of this inner treasure the primary focus of our lives.

In the meantime, I hope my words will help you see yourself in a true sovereign light. That is the real victory of light over darkness—when you can clearly discern the ignorance within. One day soon, you will also discover what is enlightened and shining within you. You will awaken to your own incredible Self.

## 2



# Maya: The Illusion That Conceals Your True Self

*“Forgetting our divine truth,  
We become enmeshed in the world of change  
And bewail our bondage.  
But when we see Self in all its glory,  
cheered by all, we achieve lasting sovereignty.”*

SHVETASHVATARA UPANISHAD, 1.6

Although mental and spiritual sovereignty are our true nature, humanity has tragically forgotten its inner spiritual core. Therefore, we need wisdom reminders.

All beings are afflicted with a spiritual forgetfulness that keeps our minds from grasping the amazingly boundless and bountiful nature of our Self. Our minds become identified with and then engaged and entangled with whatever they encounter through the senses. This clutters the mind and leads to sorrow. Rather than unbounded expansive awareness of our potential to be or become what we want, we think bounded thoughts and are proscribed by our thinking.

My spiritual teacher, Baba, who was my also my paternal grandfather, explained this to me once in poetic terms:



*“This world is an enchanted show, Shunya. A spell has spread from mind to mind throughout this world, so that the One appears as many. This spell is called maya.*

*For the duration of the phantasmal life we lead through the maya-filled mind, we believe adamantly in the roles we play, the relations we have, and the goals we hold dear. None of this is true—just like the cities we visit and the people we meet in our nightly dreams who appear real enough within the dream but disappear upon waking up in the morning.*

*One more final waking up is pending, the awakening from the dreams of maya that occur to us even when we are apparently awake and engaged, with alert senses, in the world of experiences. Even then, we are asleep, cosmically asleep to the Ultimate Reality.”*



Our forgetfulness of our inner truth has other consequences too. It induces a confused consciousness that does not permit us to discern between appearances and reality. When I asked Baba why we forget that we are always sovereign in matters of fullness, fulfillment, and joy, he responded that no one knows. The Vedic tradition does not claim to know either. It is not a know-it-all tradition that makes up stories to justify what it does not know. It simply sticks with what it observes to be universally true.

This cosmic forgetfulness, maya, is like a spell of bewilderment and spiritual blindness cast over our minds that causes a metaphysical ignorance of our true Self. Simply put, maya causes self-ignorance.

Maya prevents us from seeing what is there and makes us see what is not there. It has two characteristics: concealment (of what is) and projection (of what is not).

Through concealment, maya veils our consciousness and prevents it from knowing what is there. Through projection, maya compels the ego to know, perceive, or deduce something that is not there. People who are under the spell of maya suffer a double tragedy: they do not know what is there, but they believe firmly in the projections of the mind, or what is not there.

Thanks to this spell in our mind, a nonexistent ghost can terrify us if we simply believe it to be real. We might create images and stories (appearances) of the ghost, perhaps living in the attic or under the bed. Even a nonexistent snake can cause panic. We literally can die of a heart attack even if the snake is just a rope or a garden hose, coiled up in a dark corner. If a rope *appears* as a snake, it can elicit a deluded, panicked response in our mind. Such mirages flourish in the maya-sponsored collective unconsciousness.

At some point, you—the birth-less, death-less, disease-less Self—begin identifying with the body mirage and think of yourself as only a physical entity, one that can be broken, ruptured, or bled to death with ease. You naturally begin to fear disease, aging, and death. Biological, emotional, and social potency—health in every dimension—is your true nature, yet you subscribe to limitations wholeheartedly. This is due to maya.

When you identify with the mind mirage and its fluctuations, you identify with ceaseless changing states of mind: agitated, dull, depressed, and morbid. You *become* dark emotions and morbid thoughts, consumed by countless distractions and ceaseless worries. Your mind is naturally an instrument of abundance, yet by the mind's false associations, you experience the opposite. Despite material wealth in your life, you feel nonabundant. This is due to maya.

When you identify with the impermanence and mutability of the world mirage, you become a sleepwalker. You accept this “house of change” as your only and final home, and you forget that you are *dreaming* this shifting, morphing universe. Your true home is not some impermanent sandcastle, but you don't think to look somewhere else when you believe you are limited to living in a mirage called “the world.”

Maya is fundamentally unknowable. We don't know why it exists or when it began, but like any form of ignorance, maya will only cease to exist when sacred instruction and right knowledge—knowledge of the Self—arise in the mind. With such knowledge, we slowly remember our own inner nature and begin to live from inwardly validated and experienced mental and spiritual sovereignty. We live as rulers of our own lives.

Until then, the spell of maya first conceals who you are—the ever-present, formless Self—and then projects what you are *not*: body, mind, and intellect, the *not-Self*. Similarly, the bewitched mind conceals your state of inner fullness, peace, and bliss, and it projects a struggling you, a collapsed you, and even a time-bound, space-bound, diseased you. Ignorant of our true nature, we feel ourselves to be powerless, helpless, existentially frightened, and separate—from each other and from everything. And, at the deepest level, despite being in relationships, we feel gut-wrenchingly lonely, once again thanks to maya!

Therefore, no mind is free from the spell that makes it fall asleep, metaphysically speaking. Maya is not just lack of correct knowledge. It is opposed to knowledge as it not only conceals the true nature but also presents the false in