

The Nature of Avidyā in the Upanishads: A Philosophical Exposition

Aditya Angiras

Panjab University (Chandigarh Campus), Sadhu Ashram, Hoshiarpur, India

The Upanishads are a collection of highest ancient Indian wisdom that are part of the wider corpus of Vedic literature. They address significant philosophical and spiritual issues about the nature of universal reality as the ultimate truth, through various aphorisms. Scholars world over have been pondering upon these ancient texts, which has propagated various kinds of Indian philosophies that served as the foundation for Indian traditions. The Upanishads perceive the universe and human correlation as a dynamic interaction between the ultimate and immutable truth or Purusha which is eternal and unchanging in nature and Prakṛti or nature and for these texts, indicate the interaction between these two as transient and mutable as the nature of life is always transient and ever changing and the entire cosmos is expression of the combination of both. As Acharya Shankar suggests that the self is engulfed with Prakṛti or the five elements of nature, termed as Māyā and ignorance is its byproduct which leads the mind to illusionary waywardness. Various INDOLOGICAL scholars have commented that suggested term “Māyā” in the Upanishads is often translated as “illusion”, but this interpretation does not align with the unconventional notion of illusion. Scholars like Vroom and Doniger further elaborate that labeling the universe as an illusion (māyā) does not equate to declaring it as unreal. Māyā, not only misleads individuals through their perceived knowledge but also fundamentally restricts their understanding of concept of true happiness. Māyā represents the ever-changing nature and perceived reality and exists alongside Brahman, which is considered the hidden, true reality. And in order to achieve true content in life it is essential to perceive this core idea. Although, the term Maya is scarcely found in Upanishads, the concept of avidya is significant in the Upanishads as these texts assert that the quest for blissful and liberating self-knowledge leads to realize the higher self. This paper is a humble attempt to unveil the much debated concept of Avidya or Maya or Ignorance.

Keywords: Upanishads, Avidya, ignorance, Maya, conditioning, mindfulness

Introduction

The first and perhaps the only real concern for an everyday person is the pursuit of joy for themselves and for those close to them. This thought, cantered around happiness, often drives them to take action. It serves as a fundamental part of their moral existence, pushing them advancing in life. However, given the circumstances most people find themselves in, they struggle to envision the ethical ideals that seem just out of reach. This challenge arises because, to truly grasp these ideals, a person needs a certain mental clarity and a peaceful state of mind—something that’s quite rare in today’s fast-paced world. With the constant demands of

daily life, people often feel drained and have little time left to reflect on these deeper ethical questions. As a result, the struggle remains, regardless of how various ideals are presented, whether it's perfection, harmony, universal love, service, or freedom. Each of these concepts reflects different facets of the same overarching ideal. Therefore, the ambiguity surrounding one idea applies equally to all the others, making it a shared challenge for everyone.

The reality is that the principles of a truly joyful existence are so obscure to the broader world that the mere notion of such an ideal life often rests on noble beliefs rather than earnest commitment. This lack of awareness is hardly surprising; given the limitations of our physical and material existence, it becomes nearly impossible for individuals to peer beyond the visible signs of life and catch even a glimpse of the transcendent realms that lie beyond. Consequently, understanding a life that surpasses the ordinary cannot be achieved unless we expand our perspectives alongside an awakening of our inner selves. This inner awakening holds the promise of profound insights into our Karma, potentially guiding us towards the wisdom of a higher, spiritual existence and its tangible realization through self-discovery. India has long championed this idea, proclaiming with unwavering conviction since the dawn of civilization that the Upanishads offer the key to unlocking all the mysteries of life and the mind, as well as to realizing the ultimate purpose of existence.

Before explaining the term Avidya, it will be sensible to add that the man is always compelled to perform various actions that do not lead to a path of liberty. This is a type of psychological conditioning where one is not aware about the results of his action. Thus the theory of action must be explained prior to explaining Avidya or ignorance.

Introduction to Upanishads

What is the Upanishadic dictum of ignorance or Maya? It would be appropriate to give a brief content about the Upanishads before drawing a brief caricature of Avidya or ignorance. One of the most prominent points discussed by the Upanishad is the action and it will be appropriate to discuss the action in this context.

The Upanishads are late Vedic (Freschi, 2012, p. 62; Flood, 1996, pp. 35-39) and post-Vedic Sanskrit texts that document the transition from the archaic ritualism of the Veda into new religious ideas and institutions (Gonda, 1975), as well as the emergence of the core religious concepts of Hinduism. They are the newest addition to the Vedas, the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, and focus on meditation, philosophy, consciousness, and ontological knowledge (Witzel, 1997). Earlier parts of the Vedas dealt with mantras, benedictions, rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices (Gonda, 1975).

The Upanishads are a diverse collection of texts, with each Upanishad presenting its own unique insights and perspectives. However, some common themes run through all the Upanishads, including the idea of Atman (the true self) and Brahman (the ultimate reality). The Upanishads teach that the individual self (Atman) is identical to the ultimate reality (Brahman), and that realizing this unity is the key to liberation and enlightenment.

While among the most important literature in the history of Indian religions and culture, the Upanishads record a wide variety of rites, incantations, and esoteric knowledge, moving away from Vedic ritualism and interpreted in various ways in later commentarial traditions (Gonda, 1975). The Upanishads are widely known, and their diverse ideas, interpreted in different ways, influenced later traditions of Hinduism. The main concern of all Upanishads is to discover the relationship between ritual, cosmic realities (including gods), and the human body or person, proposing Atman and Brahman as the summit of the hierarchically arranged and interconnected

universe¹. However, different ideas about the relationship between Atman and Brahman can be found.

A total of 108 Upanishads are recognized, with the first dozen or so being the oldest and most significant, referred to as the principal or main Upanishads. The Principal Upanishads are mainly found in the concluding sections of the Brahmanas and Aranyakas, and were memorized and orally passed down by each generation for centuries (Shrava, 1977). These predate the Common Era, but scholars disagree on their exact dates or which ones are pre- or post-Buddhist. The Brhadaranyaka and Chandogya Upanishad are considered particularly most ancient by contemporary scholars and some Upanishads are part of the Muktikā canon, composed from around the last centuries of the 1st millennium BCE through approximately the 15th century CE. New Upanishads, beyond the 108 in the Muktikā canon, continued to be written into the early modern and modern periods, often dealing with topics unrelated to the Vedas. The principal Upanishads, together with the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahmasutra (collectively known as the Prasthanatrayi), are interpreted in different ways by various later Vedanta schools.

Translations of the Upanishads began attracting Western attention in the early 19th century. German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was deeply impressed by them, calling them “the most profitable and elevating reading which ... is possible in the world.” (Hatab 1982, pp. 31-38). Modern Indologists, too, are pondering over the ideas and contents of the Upanishads.

It is interesting to note that these neo Vedic scriptures are although, considered to be the highest summits of human thought with relation to spiritual India which were written in the ancient form of Sanskrit language yet, it must be said that these texts are an importunate expression of devotion led by a meaningful life where the man standing in the bare nature raises his hands asking the power Supreme to grant him the understanding to lead his life in a superior way and pray “That You are our father who will lead us to the path of emancipation.” We find frequent prayers made to Agni, Yama, Surya, etc. in this context. The pivotal point of the entire literature is the expression of Rta (The Cosmic truth) and Satya (The ideal state of truth), and Yajna (Reverent karma). The sacred texts proclaim that the Yajna (Sacred offerings) alone is the best action performed by the human being² while living here on this earth and they believe that only this type of karma can lead everyone on the path of eternal peace and has the power to emancipate them from the clutches of rebirth. The idea propagated by the Upanishads is to transcend the petty ideas relating to the meanness of mind and reject the ideas of Ego-centrism. It must be said that all of these sections of Veda have different times of perception, and it must be pointed out that the Vedic civilization divided the reverently karma into five parts, which are to be performed by every householder. These are well enumerated in the Grihya Sutras (a part of Vedic literature), and these are as follows³:

- Deva Yajna: acts to show reverence and gratitude towards the power Supreme or worshipping God.
- Pitru-Yajna: acts to show reverence and gratitude parents, forefathers, and ancestors.
- Brahma Yajna: acts to show reverence and gratitude towards Teachers and Guru.
- Manushya-Yajna: acts to show the dutiful service to humanity.
- Bhoota-Yajna: serve plant, tree, and animal kingdom and ones’ environment.

The performance of these five types of sacrifices mentioned above remains an essential part of the routine life of every householder of Neo Vedic thought. It must be added here that these people had a higher form of

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upanishads#cite_note-FOOTNOTERaju198535-36-11.

² Shatpath Brahman 1.7.1.5 Vajsaneyi Samhita: Ist Kandika.

³ Prashno Upanishad 6.8. 4.

intellect and strongly believed that they should accept the leftover part of offerings made in these five types of Yajnas,⁴ and they even pray to the power supreme to lead their mind on the noble path of life,⁵ which shows the openness of their mind.

There may be concerns regarding how society, once steeped in ritual, has become more introspective, focusing on the journey to discover the true self, which is radiant. In the ShatPath Brahman, actions are categorized into two types: those performed out of reverence to deities and those aimed at connecting with the supreme inner self of every individual, referred to as Satya, or the ultimate truth of existence. Actions directed towards the self were regarded as more significant in that historical context. The Upanishads articulate this philosophy, serving as a guide to uncovering one's inner self. Given their ties to earlier Vedic texts, the Upanishads are often situated within a ritual framework, featuring numerous sections that elaborate on the importance of ritual actions or provide interpretations of sacred verses or hymns recited during the rituals at a deeper level. A notable aspect carried over from these ritual texts is the pursuit of understanding the connections (bandhus) that link various realms of reality. Typically, these connections are observed among three domains: the cosmos, the body of the ritual sponsor (yajamāna), and the ritual site—essentially bridging the macrocosm, the microcosm, and the act of ritual itself. An illustrative instance of this perspective is found at the outset of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, where the different body parts of the horse in the aśvamedha sacrifice are likened to various elements, regions, and time intervals within the cosmos⁶.

The notion emerges that by acknowledging the detailed relationships embodied by the horse, one can unveil the enigmas of the cosmos. In this light, the era of the Upanishads in ancient India emerges as a sanctuary of serene wisdom, a time when the literary works produced reached the zenith of philosophical inquiry concerning humanity and the universe. These texts are crafted to confront and enhance the parameters of human thought, propelling ideas to their highest peaks and beyond. While these writings are often categorized as religious, they occasionally delve into the intricacies of Karmic theory when interpreted through the right lens. Central to the Upanishads is the profound connection between Brahman, or the Ultimate Reality, and Ātman, the Soul or Self. Their key message resonates deeply with the imperative to “Know Thyself”. Once this self-knowledge is attained, one finds that nothing else in this transient world holds true significance. Before we can fully grasp the theory of action as presented in the Upanishads, it is essential to reflect on the ancient Indian perspective regarding the mind. The sages of this period recognized the boundless capabilities of the human mind, acknowledging that it naturally reflects our thoughts in our speech and actions. This understanding underscores the profound relationship between thought and action, illuminating the path toward enlightened living.

According to these texts, The Mind is the ultimate king⁷ and is the ultimate reason of bondage and liberation in human beings⁸ from this world. They carve out that the reason behind the performance of any kind of action is the desire. And thus they divide the desire under three headings:

- Firstly, being a desire for sons,
- Secondly, there is the desire for wealth, and
- Thirdly, there is the desire for fame and kudos.

⁴ “Yajyen Kalpantam”: Chamak Sukta of Rudrashtadhyayi.

⁵ Shiva Shankalp Sukta.

⁶ Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.1.

⁷ Jaimini Upanishad, 1.13.3-5 & Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, 1.5.3.

⁸ Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad 4.1.6.

The man must devote himself entirely his self to fulfil one of these desires, remaining active till his death. They categorized the human mind into two parts, firstly being pure and secondly being impure⁹. According to Upanishads, the mind which is devoid of any longing or desire or anything alike is a pure mind, and the mind with longing for a desired object is an impure mind, and it is this type of mind which spurs the man in action. Arbhagh, while discussing the process of death with Yajnavalkya, enumerates that there are two type of actions and by doing good deeds one becomes virtuous and accordingly one becomes devil by performing evil deeds¹⁰. The details about good deeds can be found in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali in the form of “Yama”¹¹. Accordingly, the people of these times realized the fact that “The actions performed by a person are the result of his desires”¹², and “it is the mind that motivates everyone to act.”¹³ The Upanishadic clan, after realizing this very fact of life, prays the Supreme Soul for the eternal peace of mind, which is enriched with the noble thoughts¹⁴. Needless to say that the entire literature authored by these people shows us its openness in its behaviour and attitude and they expect everyone to regulate their longing and actions in a more sensible manner. According to them, “this is the basic law of Human Life.”¹⁵ They understand the fact that to err is humane and there might be some slackness in their character. With this understanding they ask everyone to critically examine, understand, and follow their unblemished deeds, which are non-controversial in nature¹⁶ so as to put away the vices from the human mind. The Upanishads understand that to err is humane and that is why the Upanishadic people do not put an end to the story here only. They do not claim to be the perfect masters in every field. They open vistas for everyone when they ask everyone to consult the other masters having a compassionate nature in case they have any doubts after a critical appraisal of their highest achievement¹⁷. Needless to say, they wanted to carve out a better human being.

The people of Upanishadic times, while discussing freedom of action and thought, understood that “The man is destined for action. He gets after his death what actions he performs in this world,” and therefore they urged everyone to be aware of their actions, saying “One acts what one thinks. By doing good deeds one becomes good.” They comprehended the law of action, that is, sinful actions yield sin. Thus, they proclaimed that “those who possess a mind with the power of inward concentration see and realize what is good,” and encouraged everyone to act with a mind infused with *sraddhā* (devotion), recognizing that true knowledge can only be attained through devotion, humility, and humbleness. They believed that life without devotion has no meaning, and human society cannot progress in any aspect. Therefore, they called upon the sacred fires to guide them on the righteous path for enjoying the fruits of their deeds and to eliminate all sorts of crooked sins. *Suryopanishad* emphasizes that anyone who concentrates on the ultimate truth and understands it is a true Brahmin. From the beginning, the human mind has always been conflicted about choosing between what is preferable and what is pleasurable. The *Kathopanishad* subtly presents discrimination in this respect, stating that:

⁹ MaitrayeeUpanishad 6.34.

¹⁰ Amrit Bindu Upanishad 1 & BrahmiVidyoUpanishad.1.

¹¹ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.2.13.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Brihadāranyaka kopanishad 4.1.6.

¹⁵ Shiva SankalpaSukta of Yajur Veda.

¹⁶ Taitt. 1.xi.3-4.

¹⁷ Taitt. 1.xi.3-7.

The better is one thing, the pleasant may be another. Both of these, having different aims, bind the person... of these both, come to the man at his will. The wise person discriminates, judging both and choosing the best, while the fool opts for the opposite.

The Ishāvāsyā Upanishad makes a loud call for everyone, “Not to eye upon the wealth of others.” We must keep in mind that when choices are made based on greed, lust, or similar vices, humane qualities diminish, and humans suffer consequently which may be termed as Avidya because we are unable to foresee the results of our actions. They understood that liberation from worldly concerns cannot be achieved if one becomes too involved in worldly pursuits like earning money, fame, or children. Instead, they aimed to elevate themselves to realize a higher realm of existence and urged everyone to perform actions that do not lead to bondage in the next life. In circumstances as we are, unable to understand the true purpose of life, our behaviour is rather triggered by our instincts, which is a result of our short-sightedness, and thus, we suffer.

One of the key themes that runs through the Upanishads is the idea of intuitive insight or direct knowledge (jnana) (Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 57) for leading a meaningful life. This concept is central to the Upanishadic philosophy and plays a crucial role in the quest for self-realization and ultimate liberation. In this essay, we will explore the Upanishadic intuitive insights in-depth, considering various perspectives, historical context, and contemporary relevance.

One of the key insights of the Upanishads is the idea that the ultimate reality (Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 76) (Brahman) is beyond the grasp of the intellect and can only be known through intuition or direct experience. This idea challenges the traditional notion of knowledge as something that can be acquired through reasoning and logic, and emphasizes the importance of inner awareness and spiritual intuition in the quest for truth (Easwaran, 2007, p. 97).

The Upanishads also teach that the ultimate reality (Brahman) is immanent in the world and in all living beings. This idea of immanence suggests that the divine is present in all aspects of creation, and that we can experience the sacred in our everyday lives through a deeper awareness of our own inner selves and the world around us.

Another important insight of the Upanishads is the idea of Maya, or the illusion (Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 98) of the world. The Upanishads teach that the world we perceive with our senses is not the ultimate reality, but rather a distorted reflection of the true nature of things. By transcending the illusions of the material world and realizing the true nature of reality, we can achieve liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

The Upanishads also emphasize the importance of meditation, contemplation, and self-inquiry to attain spiritual enlightenment and self-realization (Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 79). Through practices such as meditation and self-reflection, we can develop our intuitive faculties and gain direct insight into the nature of reality and our own true selves.

Historically, the Upanishads emerged in a time of great intellectual and spiritual ferment in ancient India. The Upanishadic sages were responding to the challenges of their time, such as the rise of new religious and philosophical movements, the decline of the Vedic ritualism, and the quest for deeper spiritual truths beyond the confines of traditional knowledge.

The Upanishads have had a profound impact on Indian philosophy, religion, and culture, and their insights continue to influence modern thought in various ways (Hume, 1921, p. 92). The Upanishadic concept of intuitive knowledge has inspired many spiritual traditions around the world and has influenced the development of philosophical ideas such as existentialism, phenomenology, and transpersonal psychology.

The Upanishads have also had a significant impact on the practice of yoga and meditation, which are rooted in the Upanishadic teachings of self-realization and spiritual enlightenment. The Upanishads emphasize the importance of inner awareness and self-discovery as a means of attaining liberation and ultimate happiness, and their insights continue to inspire practitioners of yoga and meditation to this day.

Thus, the Upanishads offer profound insights into the nature of reality, the self, and the ultimate goal of human life (Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 105). Their teachings on intuitive knowledge, self-realization, and spiritual enlightenment continue to inspire seekers of truth and wisdom across the world (Zaehner, 1953, p. 36). The Upanishads remind us of the importance of looking inward, developing our intuitive faculties, and seeking direct insight into the nature of reality and our own true selves. By embracing the Upanishadic teachings, we can deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world, and embark on a transformative journey of self-discovery and spiritual realization.

Introduction to Avidyā in Indian Philosophy

As submitted earlier, the core concept of *Avidyā* or ignorance stands as a cornerstone in classical Indian philosophical thought, particularly within the Upanishadic tradition and its subsequent Vedantic interpretations. To comprehend its profound implications, an examination of its etymological roots and its pervasive significance across various Dharmic systems is essential at this juncture.

The term *Avidyā* is a Sanskrit word, formed by the negative prefix “a-” (meaning “not” or “non-”) combined with “vidyā” (Williams, 2021) (knowledge, wisdom, understanding). The root of “vidyā” itself is “Vid”, which conveys the sense “to know, to perceive, to see, to understand.” Consequently, *Avidyā* fundamentally translates to “not knowing”, “not perceiving”, or “not understanding”, and it is used extensively in Hindu texts, including the Upanishads, Yoga Sutra and in other Indian religions such as Buddhism and Jainism, particularly in the context of metaphysical reality. While “ignorance” is a common English translation found in ancient Indian texts, scholars such as Alex Wayman propose “unwisdom” as a more precise rendition. This distinction is critical because *Avidyā* is not merely an absence of knowledge or a passive void. Instead, it encompasses a more profound and active misperception of reality. This includes obscuration, misconceptions, and delusions, such as mistaking illusion for reality, the impermanent for the permanent, suffering for bliss, and the non-self for the self. Incorrect knowledge is also considered a manifestation of *Avidyā*. This indicates a deeper cognitive distortion—a fundamental misapprehension of existence—rather than a simple lack of information. For instance, *Avidyā* involves confusing mundane reality as the sole reality or believing that which is ever-changing to be permanent. This active error in apprehension positions *Avidyā* as a significant metaphysical problem, necessitating a transformative solution rather than a mere intellectual correction.

Basically, *Avidyā*, in all systems of Indian philosophies, represents the fundamental ignorance and misperception of the phenomenal world. However, the Indian religions disagree on the details, for example, with Hinduism considering a denial and misconceptions of the self as a form of *Avidya* (Mayeda, 2006, pp. 76-78), and Buddhism considering the denial and misconceptions of non-self as a form of *Avidya* (Dhavamony, 1973, p. 297).

The *Vid**-related terms appear extensively in the Rigveda and other Vedas *Avidya* is usually rendered as “ignorance” in English translations of ancient Indian texts, sometimes as “spiritual ignorance” (Whicher, 1998, p. 110).

Western scholars opine that the word Avidyā is parallel to the Proto-Indo-European¹⁸ root **weid-*, meaning “to see” or “to know”. It is a cognate¹⁹ of Latin *vidēre* (which would turn to “video”) and English “wit”.

While Avidya found in Indian philosophies is translated by scholars as “ignorance”, states Alex Wayman, this is a mistranslation because Avidya means more than simple ignorance. He suggests the term “unwisdom” to be a better rendition (Wayman, 1957). The term includes not only ignorance out of darkness, but also obscuration, misconceptions, mistaking illusion to be reality or impermanent to be permanent or suffering to be bliss or a delusory perception (Wayman, 1957). He further opines that incorrect knowledge is another form of Avidya (Wayman, 1957).

Jones and Ryan (2006, p. 57) state Avidya represents fundamental ignorance, a misperception of the phenomenal world. This idea is partial in nature and cannot be termed as the holistic thought. In Hinduism, Avidya includes confusing the mundane reality to be the only reality, and it as a permanent thought, though it is ever changing (Jones & Ryan, 2006, p. 57). Although the form of actual reality consists of Atman of the higher self, which remains uninvolved at any point of time because it is bifurcated from the Power Supreme that is the imperishable reality of all the living beings, and that is beyond time and space (Foulston & Abbott, 2009, pp. 14-16).

The earliest concept of Avidya in the Vedic texts represents ignorance, but it later evolved to include anything that is a “positive hindrance” to spiritual or nonspiritual knowledge. The Upanishadic concept includes “lack of knowledge or inadequate knowledge, along with false knowledge” about the self.

Avidyā in Key Upanishadic Texts

The Upanishads, as foundational texts of Vedantic philosophy, offer profound insights into the nature of *Avidyā*, often presenting it in conjunction with its antithesis, *Vidyā* (knowledge). An examination of specific Upanishadic passages reveals varied yet interconnected perspectives on this crucial concept.

Isha Upanishad: The Interplay of Vidya and Avidyā (Verses 9-11)

The Isha Upanishad presents a particularly nuanced and, at first glance, paradoxical perspective on *Avidyā* and *Vidyā*. Verse 9 states, “They who worship Avidyā alone fall into blind darkness, and they who worship Vidyā alone fall into even greater darkness.” Olivelle translates the text as:

It’s far different from knowledge, they say, Different also from ignorance, we’re told—so have we heard from wise men, who have explained it to us. Knowledge and ignorance—a man who knows them both together passes beyond death by ignorance, and by knowledge attains immortality (Olivelle, 1998, p. 409).

In this context, *Avidyā* is interpreted as the “principle of multiplicity” stemming from ignorance about the true nature of reality. This includes perceiving the divine beings of the Vedas as separate conscious entities or failing to recognize the inherent oneness underlying the world’s duality. This “darkness” symbolizes the perpetuation of the cycle of birth and death, or *Samsara*. *Vidyā*, conversely, signifies the knowledge of oneness, encapsulated in the dictum “*Ekam Brahm, Dvitiyo Nasti*” (There is one Brahman, no second). The apparent paradox of Verse 9 finds resolution in Verse 11: “Knowledge and ignorance—a man who knows them both together, Passes beyond death by ignorance, and by knowledge attains immortality.” This suggests that true spiritual liberation is not achieved by exclusively embracing abstract non-duality (*Vidyā*) while rejecting the manifested world (which *Avidyā* represents as multiplicity), nor by merely engaging with the world without

¹⁸ “Indo-European languages”. Encyclopædia Britannica. The parent language: Proto-Indo-European.

¹⁹ Ibid.

understanding its underlying unity. Instead, it necessitates a synthesis or integrated understanding where the oneness (*Vidyā*) is recognized within the multiplicity (*Avidyā*), and vice-versa. This implies a dynamic, rather than a static, path to truth.

Some interpretations align *Avidyā* with ritualistic actions (*karma*) and *Vidyā* with the knowledge of a deity, emphasizing that both must be pursued in concert. This perspective suggests that actions performed as devotion to God (*Karma Yoga*) must be grounded in the knowledge of *Ishvara*. Another contemporary interpretation translates *Avidyā* as “un-learning” and *Vidyā* as “learning”, positing that both processes are essential to overcome mortality and attain immortality. This sophisticated understanding indicates that denying the reality of the manifestation (by exclusively pursuing abstract *Vidyā*) is to miss the fullness of the divine, which expresses itself through unity and diversity.

Katha Upanishad: Avidyā as Blindness and Misdirection (Verse 2.5)

The Katha Upanishad employs a vivid metaphor to illustrate the nature of *Avidyā*. Verse 2.5 states: “Wallowing in ignorance, but calling themselves wise, thinking themselves learned, the fools go around, staggering about like a group of blind men, led by a man who is himself blind.” (Olivelle, 1998, p. 383). This verse powerfully portrays *Avidyā* as a state of profound spiritual blindness and misdirection, where individuals, despite their intellectual pretensions or self-proclaimed wisdom, are utterly lost and incapable of guiding themselves or others towards ultimate truth.

Beyond mere intellectual deficiency, the Katha Upanishad identifies *Avidyā*, alongside *Kāma* (desire) and *Karma* (action), as the “great impediments to spiritual progress”, forming a “threefold fortress” that binds the soul to *Samsara* or the immanent world present before us. Overcoming this threefold bondage is presented as crucial for liberation. The knowledge required to transcend this state is described as “unconditioned” and beyond ordinary scientific or sensory apprehension, highlighting its transcendental nature.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: Distinguishing True Knowledge From Ritualistic/Intellectual Pursuits

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, considered one of the most ancient Upanishadic texts, also delves into the nature of knowledge and ignorance. Verse 4.10 states: “andham tamah pravisanti ye vidyam upasate tato bhuya iva te tamah ya u vidyayam ratah.” (Olivelle, 1998, p. 402).

A common traditional translation of this verse suggests that those who pursue “ignorance” (*Avidyā*) enter darkness, while those who pursue “knowledge” (*Vidyā*) enter an even greater darkness. However, a closer examination reveals that the original Sanskrit *śloka* does not explicitly mention *Avidyā*; both instances refer to “*vidyā*” (knowledge). This observation leads to a crucial re-interpretation: the verse warns against mistaking specific branches of Vedic study—“Mantra Vidyas” (associated with rituals for specific results) and “Brahma Vidyas” (intellectual study of Brahman)—for the true, liberating knowledge of the Self.

This interpretation challenges the assumption that “*Vidyā*” always denotes ultimate spiritual knowledge. Instead, it establishes a hierarchy of knowledge within the Upanishadic framework. Worldly pursuits, even those involving intellectual or ritualistic mastery of sacred texts, are deemed insufficient for liberation and can, in fact, become a hindrance if mistaken for ultimate truth, thus leading to “greater darkness”. True knowledge of Brahman, as confirmed two verses later in the same Upanishad chapter, arises from knowing the Self. This distinction underscores that genuine spiritual wisdom transcends mere intellectual understanding or ritualistic adherence. This Upanishad also serves as a foundational text for the Advaita Vedānta methodology of *Sravaṇa* (hearing), *Manana* (reflection), and *Nididhyāsana* (meditation) for knowledge acquisition.

Taittiriya and Mandukya Upanishads: Avidyā as the Veil of Reality

The Taittiriya Upanishad describes *Avidyā* as ignorance or illusion that is dispelled by *Vidyā* (knowledge), leading to the realization of one's identity with *Brahman*. It explicitly states that *Avidyā* “clouds understanding and perception” and “obscures the reality of Brahman”, while *Vidyā* brings clarity and reveals Brahman. Furthermore, *Avidyā* is identified as the cause of bondage, with *Vidyā* leading to release, and their interplay is considered fundamental to overcoming the fear of existence.

Similarly, the Mandukya Upanishad, particularly through the Gaudapada Karika and Shankara Bhashya, refers to *Avidyā* as ignorance or misunderstanding that generates false perceptions about *Ātman* (the individual soul) and perpetuates the cycle of life and death (*Samsara*). It emphasizes that *Avidyā* stands in opposition to *Vidyā*, highlighting the necessity of understanding both concepts for spiritual growth. Across these texts, a consistent portrayal emerges: *Avidyā* is not merely “not knowing”²⁰ (Olivelle, 1998, p. 383) but an active distortion of reality—a veil that obscures truth and binds the individual.

The Nature of Avidya

The concept of Avidya is fully explained in “Moksha Gita” or the “Song of Liberation”. This aligns with the Upanishadic thought of Avidya. It is believed that by practising its teachings, one gets liberated from all bondage and becomes immortal. Moksha Gita is an exhaustive treatise of the highest wisdom of the Advaita Vedanta. One cannot but be transformed into a higher spiritual state after reading this blessed Gita since it is popularly believed that a study of the Moksha Gita alone is enough to guide a sincere aspirant in the path of Jnana-Yoga, as it clears all his doubts and raises him to the Truth of Self-Consciousness. Having studied, understood, and realised this highly spiritual philosophy, one does not require any other performance for Liberation.

The Moksha Gita elucidates the path to attaining Moksha or liberation, promising the seeker to alleviate from conditioned suffering and provide profound solace for the heart. This text encapsulates the essence of the highest ideals and virtues of Upanishadic knowledge. A sincere seeker of Brahma-Jnana or liberation is encouraged to study it, as it dispels ignorance and elevates one's consciousness to the Reality of the Supreme that is Sat-chit-Ananda or a state of blissful existence which is the pinnacle of Brahma-Vidya. Thus, this text needs a formal introduction.

This text is comprised of twelve chapters in all and needs a formal brief introduction about the content of each chapter.

The Gita elucidates the path to attaining Moksha, promising to alleviate suffering and provide profound solace for the heart. This text encapsulates the essence of the highest ideals and virtues. A sincere seeker of Brahma-Jnana is encouraged to study it, as it dispels ignorance and elevates one's consciousness to the Reality of the Supreme Satchidananda, embodying Existence-Knowledge-Bliss-Absolute—the pinnacle of Brahma-Vidya.

The First Chapter introduces the aspirant seeking Liberation. Experiencing the pains of Samsara, the seeker turns to the Brahmanishtha Guru, who transcends phenomenal existence and is established in Brahman, offering

²⁰ Mundaka Upanishad references *avidya* similar to the *Katha Upanishad*, which is as “Wallowing in ignorance time and again, the fools imagine,” “We have reached our aim!”, “Because of their passion, they do not understand these people who are given to rites”: Olivelle, Patrick, ed. (1998). *The Early Upanisads: annotated text and translation*. South Asia research (in English and Sanskrit). New York: Oxford University Press. p. 383. ISBN 978-0-19-512435-4

guidance on attaining immortality and supreme bliss. The concept of the immortality of the Self is affirmed. The Second Chapter delineates the nature of Eternal Brahman, recognized as the sole Reality, the object sought by various religions and philosophies. Brahman is depicted as absolute Light, Power, Wisdom, and Bliss, being the seat of immortality and the essence behind all thoughts and actions directed toward its realization.

The Third Chapter explores Maya, the Divine Illusion that conceals Brahman and projects the perception of the world and individuality. Ishwara represents a limitation imposed by Maya. All negative traits and desires stem from the erroneous belief in the external world, which is ultimately non-existent. Liberation or Moksha is achieved through the dispelling of Maya via the Knowledge of Brahman. The Fourth Chapter details Avidya (ignorance) concerning the Jiva, establishing that it confines the real Self to the ego of separateness, doership, and enjoyment. When Avidya dissolves, the universe itself vanishes, revealing only the Supreme Brahman.

The Fifth Chapter discusses the nature of the universe, asserting that it is an unreality—a mere dream of Consciousness, imposed upon Brahman. Belief in the reality of the universe creates cycles of birth and death, and the longing for worldly activities. The universe manifests through the Vikshepa-Shakti of Anadi-Maya, leading to delusion through its Avarana-Shakti. In the Sixth Chapter, the mind is characterized as a materialization of Consciousness and an expression of the all-pervading Self, being the root cause of egoism. The mind's habitual outward orientation is addressed, with meditation highlighted as the means to transcend it.

In the Seventh Chapter, Vedantic Sadhana is explained, outlining the need for removing Adhyaropa (superimposition) through Apavada (negation). Proper practice of Sadhana necessitates prior purification of the mind. After mastering Sadhana-Chatushtaya (the fourfold qualifications), the seeker can embark on actual Sadhana, comprising Sravana (listening), Manana (reflection), and Nididhyasana (meditation). The Mahavakyas of the Upanishads communicate the identity between the Self and Brahman, which demands contemplation for realization. Complete renunciation of the three realms and their contents is essential for uncovering the Truth.

The Eighth Chapter distinguishes between ignorance and wisdom, defining ignorance as identification with the body and the belief in the world's reality, contrasting with wisdom, which sees the world as illusory and recognizes the Eternal Self as the ultimate truth. The Ninth Chapter discusses the five sheaths of the Self, delineating the expressions of inner thought manifesting in varying densities. As one moves inward, the sheaths become subtler and more enduring.

The Tenth Chapter presents the concept of Jivanmukti, illustrating the liberated sage who comprehends Brahman fully, perceiving no plurality, only unity in Consciousness, remaining with a body only as long as Prarabdha-Karma endures, leading to ultimate Videha-Mukti thereafter. The Eleventh Chapter records the Guru's final Brahma-Upadesha, affirming the singular existence of Brahman while negating the universe and body. The Twelfth Chapter captures the ecstatic response of the disciple in Self-Knowledge and spiritual experience. This Moksha Gita, serving as both philosophical discourse and practical guidance, stands as a profound tool to vanquish ignorance, affirming the enduring existence of the Secondless Brahman amidst the illusory nature of the universe and individuality.

Adi Shankara says in his Introduction to his commentary on the Brahma Sutras, that:

Owing to an absence of discrimination, there continues a natural human behaviour in the form of “I am this” or “This is mine”; this is avidya. It is a superimposition of the attributes of one thing on another. The ascertainment of the nature of the real entity by separating the superimposed thing from it is vidya,

(knowledge, illumination).

The Essence of the Moksha Gita

The nature of Avidya is clearly depicted in Moksha Geeta. The original texts is being:

The Guru said: Avidya is Malina-Sattwa. It is the Upadhi or limiting adjunct of Jiva. It is the Karana Sarira of the individual soul. Avidya is Anandamaya Kosha. Avidya, akin to Maya, pertains solely to the individual, characterized by Malina-Sattwa—Sattwa tainted by Rajas and Tamas. It induces distractive activity and stupor, controlling the individual while Ishwara remains unaffected. Avidya limits consciousness, leading individuals to mistakenly identify their bodies as the entire truth, superimposing external objects and relationships on the self. This results in a detrimental degeneration of consciousness: forgetting Reality, focusing on the localized body, and attaching personal value to external entities. The greater the superimposition, the more profound the bondage and delusion. Avidya resides in the Karana Sarira, clouding Self-awareness and fostering desires that disturb inner peace, ultimately becoming the root of human misery and egoistic existence²¹.

Avidya is a false perception by which the ignorant Jiva takes the body and intellect as pure, permanent and a source of pleasure. “Avidya” refers to the conceptual illusion that perceivable objects are inherently real, based on the belief that external senses provide absolute truths. The Self, which generates nothing but itself, misinterprets its own creations as separate, real entities. This leads to illusions, such as shadows mistaken for substance or mirages for water. Life’s turmoil is the agitation of a singular Consciousness dreaming of plurality. The universe represents the subjective Self’s dream, reflecting an illusory existence. Misconceptions about the body, mind, and intellect as sources of lasting happiness feed the delusion that the Self can achieve bliss through imagined realities. This false individuality, sustained by ignorance, perpetuates the cycle of Samsara, where accumulated ignorance and past actions persist through various forms. Liberation from this continuous cycle is attained through spiritual meditation, which disrupts the persistent stream of thought sustaining this illusion²².

Avidya is the illusion that perceivable objects are real due to reliance on external senses. The Self misinterprets its creations as separate entities, leading to false beliefs. Life’s turmoil reflects Consciousness dreaming of plurality. Misunderstandings of body, mind, and intellect foster delusions of happiness. This ignorance sustains Samsara, with liberation achieved through spiritual meditation disrupting the thoughts that support this illusion²³.

Men with defective vision perceive a white object as yellow, similar to how individuals with Avidya see the Self as the body. This distorted perception arises from a consciousness driven by material desires, which confuses the body for the Self. The five sheaths are mistakenly imposed upon the Atma, leading to further confusion. Just as changing the structure of the eyes alters one’s view of the world, subjective defects distort objective reality. A blind person perceives darkness universally; similarly, disturbed consciousness makes Brahman appear as a diverse cosmos. The Jiva’s ignorance leads to misconceptions about its eternal nature and its connection to others, resulting in a belief in separation and a mistaken faith in untruth as reality, misleading the self in its own constructs.²⁴

Knowledge of the Self destroys Avidya, the ignorance that binds one to egoism. Avidya ceases to exist when the truth is realized, particularly when attachment to life is diminished through contemplation. By turning the

²¹ Moksha Geeta Chapter 2.1 अविद्या मलिनं सत्त्वं जीवात्मोपाधिरुच्यते । तस्य कारणमूर्तिः सा कोशश्चानन्दतुन्दिलः ॥१॥

²² Moksha Geeta Chapter 2.2 अविद्या स्यादसद्बोधो येन जीवोऽवगच्छति । अज्ञो बुद्धिं तनुं शुद्धां सुखयोनिं च शाश्वतीम् ॥२॥ स्वेच्छया च यथा राजा नाटके भिक्षुभूमिकाम् ।

²³ Moksha Geeta Chapter 2.3 आधत्ते सच्चिदानन्दब्रह्मायं जीवभूमिकाम् ॥ जगन्नाटकरङ्गेऽस्मिंस्तथा लीलाकुतूहलात् ॥३॥

²⁴ Moksha Geeta Chapter 2.4 पाण्डुरं पुरुषो वस्तु कामलापीडितो यथा । पीतं पश्यत्यविद्यातस्तथाऽऽत्मानं स विग्रहम् ॥४॥

mind inward, one can overcome the limitations of existence. The realization of Self and the destruction of Avidya are simultaneous processes; it is a negative action of removing ignorance rather than acquiring something new. The essence of Reality has always been present, but it is hindered by the psychic apparatus of the Jiva. Self-realization involves dismantling these obstacles to allow the unimpeded flow of Brahman, often expressed through the Upanishads.²⁵

Brahman, the ultimate reality, is obscured by Avidya, leading to human delusion. Avidya, akin to dirt on a mirror, gives rise to selfish pursuits, prolonging life through ego-centric desires and maintaining the cycle of Samsara. To achieve liberation, individuals must overcome selfishness via self-abnegation, resisting personal cravings and lower instincts. This struggle diverts the Jiva through sensory distractions, hindering inner peace. The excessive desire for earthly existence fortifies the ego's attachments. Karma-Yoga promotes self-sacrifice for the benefit of others, fostering higher knowledge. Delusion rooted in Avidya can only be transcended through Sadhana for Perfection, aimed at dismantling the ego, which breeds further afflictions like Asmita and Abhinivesha. Spiritual growth requires aligning conduct with the eternal source and meditating on the spiritual ideal. Despite acknowledging the discord in worldly life, individuals chase material success and fame, often oblivious to the fleeting nature of such pursuits. Ultimately, liberation from Avidya occurs when one seeks refuge in the Permanent Self, ceasing further entanglement in earthly endeavors.²⁶

Conclusion

Avidya, often translated as ignorance or spiritual ignorance, constitutes a significant concept in Indian philosophy and spirituality, particularly within the contexts of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Avidya serves as a foundational concept that highlights the importance of knowledge and enlightenment in achieving self-realization and liberation (Aurobindo, 1920, p. 29). The term is frequently discussed in contrast to vidya, which means knowledge or wisdom (Williams, 2021). Avidya is perceived as the root cause of human suffering, leading individuals to remain trapped in cycles of illusion and ignorance. Its implications extend to various realms, including ethics, spirituality, and social dynamics (Aurobindo, 1920, p. 110).

Historically, the notion of avidya emerged from ancient Indian philosophical texts, particularly the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. The Upanishads delve into the idea that mundane perceptions can cloud one's vision of the ultimate reality, referred to as Brahman. In this context, avidya is identified as a barrier preventing individuals from recognizing their true nature and potential (Aurobindo, 1920, p. 51). The Bhagavad Gita complements this by presenting a discourse on self-knowledge, emphasizing the need to overcome ignorance to attain spiritual wisdom (Gandhi, 1909, p. 490).

Influential thinkers have further elaborated on the concept of avidya. In the early 20th century, Sri Aurobindo and his philosophical writings addressed avidya by exploring the transformative power of knowledge (Aurobindo, 1920, p. 50). Aurobindo viewed ignorance as a veil obscuring one's divine essence. He posited that to transcend avidya, individuals must engage in a conscious pursuit of knowledge and spiritual development (Gupta, 2019, p. 154). Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi (1909, p. 495) underscored the importance of education in overcoming ignorance within society. His perspective contributed to a holistic understanding of avidya as not only an individual challenge but also a social one.

²⁵ Moksha Geeta Chapter 2.5 आत्मबोधोद्गमे तात सैवाऽविद्या विनश्यति । अतोऽविद्या विनाशो हि ब्रह्मास्पदमुदीर्यते ॥५॥

²⁶ Moksha Geeta Chapter 2.6 यथाऽऽदर्शो मलेनाम्बुं याति तद्वदविद्यया । ब्रह्माऽऽवृतं ततो मर्त्या विमुह्यन्ति मुहुस्तया ॥६॥

From a philosophical perspective, avidya is not limited to the simple absence of knowledge. Instead, it encompasses a deeper misunderstanding of one's self and the nature of existence. In Buddhism, avidya takes on a nuanced form referred to as "ignorance of the four noble truths" (Chatterjee, 2018, p. 123). This perspective highlights that avidya leads to desire, attachment, and ultimately suffering. The Buddhist path advocates for mindfulness and meditation as a practical tool to counteract avidya, leading to enlightenment (nirvana).

In contemporary society, the implications of avidya remain relevant. The explosion of information facilitated by the internet and social media poses a paradoxical challenge. While access to knowledge has dramatically increased, so too has the prevalence of misinformation, leading to a new form of avidya (Gupta, 2019, p. 73). Individuals may become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information available, resulting in confusion and misguided beliefs. This scenario underscores the importance of critical thinking and discernment in the pursuit of knowledge.

Moreover, avidya influences ethical considerations in modern contexts. For example, the persistence of social inequalities and environmental degradation can be traced back to ignorance of interconnectedness and the shared responsibility humanity holds towards the planet and each other. The ramifications of avidya extend beyond personal limitations and affect collective decision-making and societal progress. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to foster awareness and understanding.

Recent years have seen various movements aimed at reducing ignorance in different spheres of life. Educational initiatives focusing on critical thinking and media literacy have gained traction (Houghton, 2021, pp. 112-126). Moreover, the rise of Mindfulness practices draw directly from ancient teachings on overcoming avidya. These practices encourage individuals to cultivate self-awareness, fostering a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world (Houghton, 2021). As society grapples with complex challenges, the teachings surrounding Avidya may offer valuable insights into promoting harmony and balance.

Looking towards the future, the role of avidya in understanding and addressing global challenges will likely expand. As technology continues to evolve, the need for discernment in navigating information will grow. Educational frameworks may increasingly incorporate principles from ancient philosophies, blending traditional wisdom with contemporary knowledge. This integration can empower future generations to transcend ignorance, fostering a more conscious and compassionate society.

In conclusion, avidya serves as a critical concept within the realms of philosophy and spirituality, with profound implications for individual and collective growth. Its historical roots provide a rich context for understanding the significance of knowledge in personal and societal development. Influential figures have contributed to the ongoing discourse surrounding avidya, shedding light on its multifaceted nature. As contemporary challenges emerge, addressing ignorance becomes essential, not only for personal enlightenment, but for fostering a more informed and harmonious global community. By recognizing the enduring relevance of avidya, individuals can take meaningful steps toward transcending ignorance in their lives and the world around them.

The second chapter of the Yoga Sutra is the most practical in nature as it outlines what is to be done to overcome Avidya or ignorance and provides a breakdown of Kriya yoga or the yoga of action. Kriya Yoga has three slices: Tapas or righteous austerities, Svadhyaya or self-study, and Isvara Pranidhana, or surrender to Power supreme, and suggests continuing to practice these basic forms of yoga so as to attain Sattva or luminosity in the mind, which occurs after much practice, and a new life begins for the practitioner.

References

- Aurobindo, S. (1920). *Essays on the Gita*. India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- Chatterjee, T. D. (2018). *Buddhism and the four noble truths*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dhavamony, M. (1973). *Phenomenology of religion*. Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press. ISBN:978-88-7652-474-5
- Easwaran, E. (2007). *The Upanishads*. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press.
- Flood, G. (1996). *An introduction to Hinduism*. New York: Cambridge University Press. ISBN:978-0-521-43878-0
- Foulston, L., & Abbott, S. (2009). *Hindu Goddesses: Beliefs and practices*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press. ISBN:978-1902210438
- Freschi, E. (2012). The Vedas are not deontic authorities in absolute sense and may be disobeyed, but are recognized as a deontological epistemic authority by a Hindu orthodox school.
- Gandhi, M. (1909). *Hind Swaraj*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House.
- Gonda, J. (1975). *Vedic literature: (Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas)*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag. ISBN:978-3-447-01603-2
- Gupta, S. R. B. (2019). *The philosophy of Brahman in the Upanishads: A comparative study*. New Delhi: Book Health.
- Hatab, L. (1982). *Neoplatonism and Indian thought*. R. B. Harris (Ed.). New York: State University of New York Press. ISBN:978-0-87395-546-1.
- Houghton, W. R. K. (2021). Modern Avidya: Ignorance and its implications in the digital age. *Journal of Contemporary Philosophy*, 45(2), 112-126.
- Hume, R. E. (1921). *The thirteen principal Upanishads*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, C., & Ryan, J. D. (2006). *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. New York: Infobase Publishing. ISBN:978-0-8160-7564-5
- Mayeda, S. (2006). *A thousand teachings: The Upadesasahasri of Sankara*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. ISBN:978-81-208-2771-4
- Olivelle, P. (Ed.). (1998). *The early Upanisads: Annotated text and translation*. South Asia research (in English and Sanskrit). New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN:978-0-19-512435-4
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1992). *The principal Upanishads*. New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Shrava, S. (1977). *A comprehensive history of Vedic literature—Brahmana and Aranyaka Works*. New Delhi: Pranava Prakashan.
- Wayman, L. (1957). The meaning of Unwisdom (Avidya). *Philosophy East and West*, 7(1/2), 21-25. doi:10.2307/1396830
- Whicher, I. (1998). *The integrity of the Yoga Darsana: A reconsideration of classical yoga*. New York: State University of New York Press. ISBN:978-0-7914-3815-2
- Williams, M. M. (2021). *Sanskrit English dictionary*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House.
- Witzel, M. (1997). The development of the Vedic Canon and its schools: The social and political milieu. In M. Witzel (Ed.), *Inside the texts, beyond the texts: New approaches to the study of the Vedas* (Harvard Oriental Series, Opera Minora; vol. 2). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Zaehner, R. C. (1953). *Hindu scriptures*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons.