

VOL. 2 ISSUE 1

# THE HAMSA

A magazine for learning and living Advaita Vedānta



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## Dedication to Our Lineage



This magazine is created with deepest gratitude to our spiritual teacher, our Guru and guide, Acharya Shunya, who is disciple of her Guru, Baba Ayodhyanath, who is disciple of his Guru, Paramatman Shanti Prakash. These eminent teachers, from Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India are bearers of sacred knowledge of Advaita Vedānta, as expounded in the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gīta and Brahma Sutras.

This magazine is a humble reflection of the non-dual Truth Acharya Shunya’s students have received from her live discourses in her Vedic Spiritual Studies Program at Vedika Global - Acharya Shunya’s wisdom school in Emeryville, California.





Jai Maa,

*Welcome to Volume 2, Issue 1 of The Hamsa Magazine*

The daily cycle of day and night is a powerful rhythm for all of creation. Ayurveda teaches us that the more we align our lifestyle with this universal pulse, the more vibrantly health will bloom from within us as all kinds of physical, mental, emotional, social, environmental, and spiritual wellbeing. Those outside transitions of darkness and light have practical effects on every level of our being, and with personal observation and wisdom from a Teacher, we begin to perceive that throughout the dynamic play of shadow and light, there is a forever awake, forever illumined source of consciousness shining within us. Here we step into the realm of Vedānta.

This Issue's articles approach all kinds of darkness and light, ignorance and consciousness, and dust off the unified and unchanging Truth underlying them all.



In first-time contributor Sakshi's article, 'Discovering your Sākshi Self,' we explore the 'sleep of the soul,' where our True Self forgets its own eternally-awake nature. This is the sleep of ignorance that we are all trying to wake up from on the spiritual path. Then, Acharya Shunya's story related to sleep is a lullaby for the child within all of us who is gripped by fear of the world and so unable to surrender to the nourishing and mothering Devī (goddess) of sleep. Only when we acknowledge the ever-shining source of Light within are we secure enough to welcome physical sleep that nourishes the body and mind. Throughout this Issue you will find student writers and seasoned teachers exploring themes of apparent darkness in what we know is a fundamentally light-filled Universe.

May these timeless teachings reaching you from countless teachers, sadhus and the Vedas offer new ways to engage with the rough texture of day to day life and remind you of the pure and formless consciousness infusing it all.

In Service,

*Ishani Naidu*  
Editor in Chief

# Discovering Your Sākshi Self

By Sākshi Joanne Banuelos



Who am I? What real part of me stays the same while everything else about me seems to change? So many of us have asked ourselves these questions throughout our lifetime. In looking for an answer, we may ask ourselves, ‘Am I the body?’ The body changes; we are born, we grow, we develop, we age, then the body dies. No, we cannot be the body. ‘Am I the mind?’ Thoughts come and go, the mind goes through its likes and dislikes, its judgements, anger, love, hate. No, the mind too must be impermanent. I ask myself, ‘Am I a daughter, wife, friend, mother?’ Are these permanent or impermanent? These all can also change. Then what is permanent? Vedānta says Truth, the Oneness of all, and that Oneness is something we have forgotten because we get so caught up in the trappings of this material world. A person can go through life striving for all the material things that bring comfort - a well paying job, a beautiful home, cars, family life, and still feel an emptiness inside that these things don’t seem to satisfy. Once we start to inquire about what does bring lasting happiness and contentment by looking within, sitting with a Truth teacher, the question many of us have asked, ‘Is this all there is?’ goes away and we begin to step into our Truth.

Through the teachings of Vedic Spiritual Studies with Acharya Shunya, we are shown a different way to see ourselves in this world. Deep within each of us is something separate from the changing layers of our ego/personality that we accept as “I”. In Sanskrit this is called *sākshi*, which translates as ‘the observer.’ We can access this observer through our *sākshi bhāva* (observer feeling) in our day to day lives. It is always with us and has always existed, Vedānta says.

Our ego/personality, which Acharya Shunya calls ‘the actor self,’ is something we need to live in this world. To do our jobs, make a living, take care of our families, perform all of our day to day tasks depends on this actor self. Though there is a practicality and utility to this part of ourselves, it is not all of who we are. When we ask what connects us to a greater purpose, a deeper, satisfying, knowing what Life is all about, this is where accessing our sākshi bhāva within starts to uncover our True Self.

This observer witnesses all of our thoughts and actions without judgement or desire for certain outcomes. Acknowledging the observer brings a sense of relief from our everyday likes and dislikes, worries, ups and downs of the mind which we previously thought defined our existence. When we feel a presence within that is unchanged and independent of the life circumstances around us, the fluctuations of life feel somehow lighter. We can access this observer by the practice of stepping outside or away from thoughts, our actions and only observe. It can be done, if only for moments at a time. We can step outside of our small selves and be in the moment. For example, at a family gathering, there may be one relative that can never be appeased and is always finding fault, and instead of getting caught up in their story like we usually would in the past, we simply step back and observe. By observing, judgements fall away and a genuine feeling of compassion arises. To truly become aware of the pulse of Life within us and all around us, this Observer dissolves into a feeling of unity and oneness with all.

## Awakening to Soul Consciousness

The ancient Vedānta texts, the Upanishads, say our entire existence as we perceive it in daily life is due to one long sleep of the soul. Awakening to the presence of the soul is a journey through three states of consciousness. In the Awake state, we are living in this physical cycle of birth and death, we are bound by impermanence. Everything in this *māyā* (world of phenomena) changes. My teacher, Acharya Shunya calls this māyā a magic show; things appear to be so solid or permanent, then disappear. We are bound by impermanence, but we don’t question what or if anything persists underneath the changes because we’ve totally forgotten our true Self.



*How then do we find our true Self? Through an awakened teacher (guru) who questions everything in this world and asks us to do the same.*

Through *Sādhana Chatushtayam* (a series of conscious behaviors a student of Vedānta cultivates so they can progress on their spiritual path) teachings of *viveka* (discrimination between what is real and what is not real in this world,) we ask ourselves on a daily basis, “Is what I’m experiencing real? Is it unchanging or will it be something different in the future?” Is this world not bound by cycles of change? The child is born and depends on the mother and father. Over time the child grows and becomes an adult, the mother and father grow old and now depend on the child. Is this Truth that never changes, or untruth, which is always changing?

An awakened teacher will ask, “Are you in bondage through this world dream or are you present?” Present to Truth that never changes through past, present, and future cycles of time. This Truth cannot come from the senses. Our strong feelings come from the actor who is trapped and allured by this material world.

In the Dream State the “I” (*abamkāra*, ego) is invested in the astral realm. This realm is more subtle than the gross physical world we encounter when we are awake, but still has fluctuating qualities. Dreams are all mindmade. They can seem so real upon waking but as the day unfolds we forget our dreams. Acharya Shunya related this to the cycle of birth and death; we fall asleep and wake up in another life.

The Deep Sleep State is said to be where we lose that identity with the actor self. It may be only for a few moments, but for those moments we are in bliss and wake up feeling renewed and refreshed. According to the Upanishads, in this deep sleep, we die a symbolic death as our consciousness disconnects from our senses and mind. During this deep sleep for a few moments everything is shut down, gone, this consciousness is at its deepest place, this consciousness curls back into a seed. Here the actor finds some rest in the heart.

## Practices to Identify with the Observer

Practice in your waking state being the observer, whether doing daily tasks at home, at work, in traffic, or a family gathering. Our true nature is to observe, so this is not hard to do because you are expressing your true Self. The more the sākshi bhāva, the less reactive the actor. What if you Observed your emotions as part of the actor’s emotions? Another teaching from Sādhana Chatushtayam is known as *vairagya* (dispassion) or non-attachment to our emotions. This practice of reminding ourselves that passing emotions belong to the actor and do not affect our deepest Observer Self helps us differentiate between what is temporary (emotions) and what is eternal (the sākshi / Observer). Vairagya cultivates a little space between the actor and the Observer and this gives us a chance to respond consciously rather than impulsively react to life situations.

Try to observe the actor in the awake state, and then before sleep, ask to observe in the dream state, and possibly evoke the sākshi bhāva which is already there during deep sleep.

Have you had that perfect, deep, satisfying sleep? What do we experience after a good sound sleep? We wake up saying, ‘I slept well.’ If you were asleep, how did you know you slept well? There must be something that was aware while you slept. It was that which is always present, your sākshi, who knew.

The deep sleep state is said to be almost like a short death - we are no longer in a dream state as the doer, we are in a state of suspension where the mind seems to disconnect from the senses, no thoughts to disturb, a complete settling of the mind.

When we are in an observer state all the way into the depths of deep sleep this is where awakening happens. What if the observer and not the actor was awake where this māyā is at its densest? The observer pierces thru this fine layer and on the other side is Pure Consciousness. This sākshi consciousness is a substratum of all the changes the actor goes through. The more aware we become of our observer state, the less we will be carried away by external changes of consciousness and internally your true nature starts to be revealed. You will be able to distinguish between the actor and the true self.

As we practice bringing in the observer, we will have less reactivity, improved relationships, and a knowingness emerges within. Compassion will rise within. We will start to see our loved ones, not through our judgements or agendas, but we recognize them as ourselves, a Oneness unfolds. God is waking us up from this cosmic dream, this material world, what we were believing to be our reality. What is not real, falls away, and Self-Realization starts to breathe within. Our sākshi gradually helps the actor become a freer actor and we start to live from our Heart center and Life is sweeter.

# Māyā and Brahman: Creativity of the Creator

Ishani Naidu



A gold miner sits on the edge of a stream, dipping his pan into the sand and silt and letting the water run across it. He clears the bulky leaves and twigs, tossing them back onto the banks. Gently shaking the sieve, the worthless dust falls away. What is left he closely inspects, scratching the dirty surfaces, holding pebbles to the light, looking for that telltale hint of gold. Hidden deep in the mountain upstream he knows there is a vein of pure gold, but it is too hard to reach and too difficult to locate. So while he daydreams of stumbling across the source, he contents himself with making a living here along the stream, sifting through so much worthless matter, looking for a few small flecks of the valuable heart of the mountain that will sustain him.



## Brahman, the Universal Soul

*Brahman* is the Sanskrit name given to the pure consciousness underlying all of existence. It is literally the medium through which all substances emerge, and while the manifested substances may change, Brahman itself remains unchanged. It is only a conscious witness to the dramatic ups and downs of life. Advaita Vedānta tells us that Brahman is infinitely expansive. It is pulsating everywhere. Acharya Shunya explains in her satsanghas that the Soul (*Ātman* in Sanskrit) that gives consciousness to our minds and animates our bodies with life, is none other than Brahman itself. Hearing this wisdom from a teacher, we feel comforted being told that this universal Soul nature is within us and totally independent of the alternating joys and sorrows we experience moment to moment.

Yet no matter how much the teacher describes our timeless essence in stories, or the ancient Advaita Vedānta texts lay out its mechanisms, will just listening to these words bring us face to face with the shining Self we are aching to greet? However vividly someone describes to you the culture, architecture and weather of Bali, can you say you have experienced it? You must make the journey yourself to really know.

## It Definitely Isn't *This*



To guide us home to our deepest nature, the sages have offered us a methodical mental practice to trace the path back to the Self. The practice is called '*neti-neti*' which means, 'not this, not this.' Like a miner looking for gold scoops up rocks and stones and first rejects everything that *isn't* gold, in the same way, a spiritual aspirant looking for the pure consciousness of the Self is instructed to first release his or her attachments to what is *not* the Self.

We look at the objects we own, the professional success we have accumulated, the relationships we have, the body we see in the mirror, and we ask ourselves, "Are these going to stay the same forever? Does my eternal essence depend on these things for happiness?" We find that no, life goes on despite our possessions gained and lost, the friends sometimes turned enemies, the inevitable wrinkles and greying hair. As the noise and distraction of what is temporary settles down, that eternal presence we were seeking all along will reveal itself from within.

## Qualities of Māyā

Those layers that we are so delicately peeling away from our definition of who we really are, are called *Māyā*. *Māyā* is made up of three qualities – called *gunas* – which have different characteristics that combine and permute to form all of creation. *Tamas* is the quality (guna) of inertia which makes tangible manifestation possible with its blocking and unmoving aspect. *Rajas* is the activity principle that is the moving aspect of manifestation. *Sattva* is the knowledge part of creation that is most closely reflecting pure consciousness. When we are feeling dull, depressed and lazy, *tamas* is dominant in the mind. Fiery emotions of anger and jealousy indicate excessive *rajas*. A mental state of balanced, clear calm is the hallmark of a mind full of *sattva*.

*Māyā* is not only creating our mental world, however. All of the environment is made up of *gunas* and therefore is also *Māyā*. Once we begin to entertain the idea that who we really are is something beyond what we have discarded as temporal and fluctuating, it is a small but radical leap of consciousness to apply the same logical framework to the world around us. If I watch leafy branches of a tree swaying in the breeze, I can say that the solid trunk and fibres of the leaves are dominant in *tamas* guna, the movement of the wind and flow of sap within its branches demonstrate the presence of *rajas*, and the tree's innate knowing of when to flower, when to fruit, and when to seed is the *sattva* aspect.

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**Knowledge of the gunas, layered over a foundation practice of 'neti-neti' becomes a transformative tool to understand the observable world.**

.....

We begin to interpret the changes of *Māyā* more as a science of physics, and it becomes possible to distinguish our abiding happiness and sense of Self from the play of subtle and gross matter.

As the building blocks of manifestation, the three *gunas* are in a constantly changing relationship with each other. Because *Māyā* is entirely made up of these characteristics, *Māyā* must also change over time. The greatest mountain will eventually crumble and dissolve into the sea. The body decaying in the graveyard will nourish new plants which will feed caterpillars that morph into butterflies. The awkwardness of youth eventually ripens into graceful confidence. Time grinds on and *Māyā* dances with it, never the same for long and never exactly the same way twice. So when we observe that friendships change over our lifetime, or our hometown has gentrified since our last visit, or our thoughts jump quickly moment to moment – those observable changes are the proof that they are all part of *Māyā*.

Through the process of *neti-neti* we become attuned to what is *Māyā*. We cultivate a little space between our Observer Self (the constant witness) and the material world (the constantly changing.) As Acharya Shunya said, "This *neti-neti* is like a weed killer. You put it and it kills all the weeds of inaccurate identities. I am a mother, I am the founder, I am the President, all these titles are laughable. Knowing that I am Ātman, I am Brahman, I am *satchitānanda* [eternal consciousness and bliss], has allowed me to bring breathing space between all these titles." With practice, we are able for at least a few moments at a time, to disengage our default self-identification with the outward labels and aspects of our physical and mental world that constantly change.

## An Understanding Emerges

As what is *not* Brahman comes into sharp relief through the practice of *neti-neti*, an understand of what is Brahman emerges out of the contrast. Where *Māyā* is all that is unconscious, Brahman is pure consciousness itself. *Māyā* is made up of qualities (*gunas*) that change over time, and Brahman is that which is without *gunas* and so is constant through all phases of time – past, present and future. Brahman is a truth of infinite existence that will never end. It is pure consciousness without any trace of *tamas* or *rajas* in it. It is an infinite joy and bliss that never devolves into sorrow like the temporary happiness we experience with the people and things in our daily lives.

When the definitions of *Māyā* and Brahman are viewed side by side, it at first appears that *Māyā* is the cause of all our suffering and to experience Brahman is our salvation. This is the moment where the student must keep going deeper in their understanding, or else they will be left totally disenchanted with the outside world. When taken on its own, the process of *neti-neti* convinces us that everything we think, see, smell, taste, hear and feel is *not* ultimate reality since it is made up of *gunas* that will change and cause us suffering. At this level we are tempted to see everything labeled as *Māyā* as a parlor trick, a mirage intended to ensnare us in the dream where we forget the Self. According to this thinking, *Māyā* is something we have to struggle to break free from if we want the ultimate spiritual freedom.

## An Inseparable Power

Advaita Vedānta teaches a fascinating relationship between *Māyā* and Brahman that fills out and grounds our understanding of both temporary and ultimate reality. Rather than simply an inferior category of separate, dead matter – *Māyā* is actually Brahman's superpower to be or become anything. Brahman, as pure consciousness, has an inexhaustible creative potential, and *Māyā* is Brahman's mechanism for manifestation. **If Brahman is the spontaneous and inspired child, *Māyā* is the collection of different shapes and sizes of building blocks she uses to build. If Brahman is the artist filled with an irrepressible desire to create, *Māyā* is the lump of clay begging to be shaped.**



Since Brahman is eternally existing beyond time, its potential to be and become is also eternal, so *Māyā* and Brahman share an aspect of being *anādi*, meaning 'without beginning or end.' The innumerable manifestations of *Māyā* are constantly emerging and dissolving, but the powerful potential to be and become is always present as a faculty of Brahman. Yet, this creation and manifestation function of *Māyā* is totally dependent upon Brahman's illumination. *Māyā* is the bulb, but Brahman is the current that lights it up.

## Applying This Wisdom

If our true nature is that of timelessness, expansive consciousness and unalloyed bliss, then why do we and everyone else seem to be living lives so boxed by limitation and exhausting cycles of suffering and temporary joys? Advaita Vedānta explains that this happens because *Māyā* has fogged over our memory of our true nature and so we have gotten locked into a game of looking for our abiding wholeness in the unstable world outside. The practice of *neti-neti* breaks us out of this default mode and creates a sliver of space between the manifested world of *Māyā* and our deepest Self (Brahman) where we can begin to turn inward and connect to the independent source of light and consciousness within.

But *Māyā*'s ultimate purpose is not simply to make us forget our soul nature. For as much suffering it causes us, it is not a punishment nor a curse. Rather, *Māyā* is the equally timeless and inseparable creative faculty of Brahman. This means that since Brahman is everywhere and in everything, so too is its creative power surging through every corner of your being.

To boldly and creatively live life to our full potential is to align ourselves with Brahman's supreme creative power. When we do this, without attachments, within the worldly set-up of *Māyā*, we are asserting our deepest spiritual capacities and acting as a microcosm of the macrocosmic creator. To view every blade of grass, skyscraper, co-worker, lover, enemy as a divine manifestation of Brahman through the power of *Māyā* is to live life with reverence, awe and acceptance of all life's shades and textures. Even as we detach ourselves by retracting our mental identification with what is outside and pulling it back toward identification with the Self, we can worship all that is *not that* as proof of That's never-ending power to create.

# Everyday Vinaya

How light colors and cleanliness relieve suffering of the mind

Aparna Amy Lewis



I have been a student of Acharya Shunya for the last ten years. As a new student, fresh to Vedic rituals and customs (also known as *Vinaya* in Sanskrit), I had many questions about the “what, when, why, where and how,” of participating in a spiritual community. With the gentle guidance of my teacher and senior community members, I received answers and settled more comfortably into my studentship. Now, as Dean of the Vedic Spiritual Studies program, I am privileged to share this knowledge with the next generation of our *sampradāya*.

In our sweet *kula* (spiritual school community) we often wear white and light colors such as saffron or gold, and even clothe our building and altars in these colors.

These colors are considered auspicious, beneficial, and even purifying. A student recently asked me whether wearing black clothes was bad or a mark of something inauspicious. The short answer is no, and the longer answer comes when we understand the “why”.



Advaita Vedānta, Ayurveda and Yoga, the three *vidyas* (Vedic sciences) we teach at Vedika Global, are neither superstitious nor dogmatically rigid. Rather, they are rooted in an 8000+ year old tradition of closely observing our mental, physical and spiritual relationship to the phenomenal world, and making intentional choices to improve our experience. There is a reason why we choose light and bright colors, and it’s not because darker colors are evil.

Rajas, Tamas and Sattva are *gunas*, or qualities, of the mind. They are energetic states that determine the quality and tenor of our mind and thoughts. In very simple terms, when our minds are agitated we are experiencing *Rajas*, when resistant and depressive we are experiencing *Tamas*, when in a balanced calm mental state, we are experiencing more *Sattva*. These *gunas* influence (and are influenced by) our experiences of the physical world. They are mutable and changeable. Ultimately, each of these *gunas* acts like an overlay of our *ātman* (that inner Self which is eternal, divine and always witnessing our own thoughts and mind). Even Sattva, balanced pure shining Sattva, is still just a reflection of our essential nature, not *ātman* itself.

Because the *gunas* describe qualities and characteristics, they are ultimately part of the physical matrix that constructs *māyā* (our collective experience of reality - the perceptual world). *Gunas* are both a reflection of our environment (inner and outer) and affected by our environment (both inner and outer). When we describe associated qualities of each *guna*, we are not pointing to isolated characteristics, rather potential expressions of an underlying energetic state.

Tamas, is associated most with *āvarana* or covering. If we understood the *buddhi* (intellect+memory+ego) as a mirror of our deepest divine Self (*ātman*), then being in a dominant state of Tamas, is to be in a maximal state of darkness from the light of *ātman*. This does not mean evil. When we sleep for example, our mind requires some *tamas* to shut down the constant flow of thoughts and stimulus from our senses. Rather it means a maximal state of ignorance to our true Self. In Tamas, we are in a state of forgetting that we are more than the small self, more than our ego personalities, more than our feelings of separation and isolation. What we can understand is that when we are already in a mental state dominant in Tamas, we are likely to find ourselves resistant to change, lethargic, tending to inactivity and laziness. That may express itself in depression, and an inability to care for oneself including cleaning the body and home, etc.

“Likes increase like, opposites reduce.”

This maxim dictates Ayurvedic *chikitsa* (therapy). This is why taking mindful action to clean our house, wear clean clothes (whatever color), get rid of clutter, bring flowers and living beings into our space and hearts, all helps to relieve the oppressive overlay of Tamas. However, a clean house and a shower is not a guarantee against *tamas* in our mind. Similarly, while lighter colors do evoke more sense of lightness in the mind, it doesn’t necessarily mean that dark colors are bringing about more *tamas*.

Rajas is associated most with the quality of restless agitation and maximally reinforces the ego. A *rajas* dominant mind may express itself with an excessive attachment to rules and discipline. If you find yourself in “Always/Never” or “Doing” mode, it is a good indicator that it’s time to find your compassionate center. Stimulating colors and tastes, experiences and relationships, can all increase the power of *rajas*. Some *rajas* is a healthy support for the spiritual student. Taking action to start practices, to wake up and get moving, to set firm boundaries all help to move away from Tamas and towards Sattva.

That said, *rajas* is by its nature unstable - sometimes pointed towards that knowledge of Self, then spinning us away in distracted pursuit of achievement and ambition. This can come up in our spiritual pursuits too - the spiritual ego is a *rajas* dominant ego. “I’m more evolved than that guy! My teacher is better than yours! I do more *Sevā* and *sadhana* (service and spiritual practices)! I always wear white and that guy doesn’t, so he’s not as pure as me!” *Rajas, rajas, rajas...*

What we want for spiritual evolution, healthy social engagements, and good discernment, is a strong stable mind - dominant in *sattva*, with healthy *rajas* and *tamas*. This means developing a mind that is able to stay balanced in the face of external stimulus. In this way, whether we are wearing a black sweatshirt or a white Kurta, we retain our memory of our divine Self, our eternal *ātman*.



The analogy of the lotus is used frequently in Vedānta and in our Vedika home (see our beautiful logo!), to remind us of this very quest. The lotus grows and thrives, strives and blooms above stagnant foul dirty water. Unblemished by the dirty murky waters below, happily receiving the light of the sun, and evoking *sattva*, with its beautiful flowers and lush green leaves above.

Cleanliness is a tool to evoke more *sattva*. It’s easier to feel harmonious and calm in a clean spacious environment with the soft scents of flowers and spices, the gentle sounds of birds and musical instruments, and light and bright colors all around us. But *shaucham*, or purity, also speaks to achieving an internal quality of stability in *sattva*- unswayed from an abiding knowledge of Self - even when we find ourselves in crowded dirty environments with stinky air, loud noises, and grime.

We start relieving the suffering of minds dominant in *Rajas* and Tamas by taking physical action. For the depressed person being an unwashed lump on the couch, wearing clean fresh light colored clothes, and getting up and cleaning body and home, will have a hugely beneficial effect on the mind. For the spiritual student who is dominant in *rajas* and occasional *sattva*, who is ready to find abiding stability in *sattva*, it’s time for the subtler practices of *Upāsana* and *Karma Yoga*.

Ayurveda, Yoga and Advaita Vedānta offer us many practical tools to purify our mental state; reduce *Rajas* and Tamas; and relieve our own suffering. When we ourselves are more stable and reflect more of the inner light of our innate divine Self, we naturally relieve the suffering of others.

Love and light,

Aparna

# Accepting Our Desires

Vidya Deepa Gupta



Each living being on this planet is born with desires. Most animals have desires related to pleasure and hunting for food, but a human life is unique since it also comes with desires at various other levels. Human beings are the only species that go beyond basic survival instincts to question the purpose of their life.

In today's world, there are certain spiritual and moral teachings that profess suppression of desires to purify the mind or to be closer to God. Vedānta on the other hand, says that it is completely valid and natural to have desires. Instead of making a person feel bad about having them, it teaches and encourages a person to use their intellect to evaluate desires and fulfill them or release them in a healthy manner.

We all understand that desires, when unchecked, can lead to sorrow or obsessive tendencies. Every desire that we try to fulfill leads to many emotions, like joy in the fulfillment of or sorrow in being denied fulfillment of a desire. As we race to fulfill our wants and avoid the pain of having our desires thwarted, our choices and mental state becomes less and less stable as they yo-yo between further and further emotional extremes. So the bigger question is, if desires are completely valid, then how should we approach them so that we remain in a state of balance no matter what the outcome of our effort to satisfy them? Vedānta, provides us a map for the same.

## Vedānta says there are four goals of human existence, namely - Dharma, Artha, Kāma, Moksha.

*Dharma* relates to living life with nobility, following a good value system and conscious living. *Artha* relates to fulfillment of the basic needs of our life. For example, having a job so that we can pay our bills, have a house to live in, and have food to eat is necessary for survival. *Kāma* relates to experiences of pleasure, for example, going on vacation, buying things that we like, listening to music, etc. *Moksha* relates to attainment of the ultimate desire, which is for liberation from the cycle of suffering and desires by understanding one's true spiritual nature.

Acharya Shunya mentions that according to Vedānta, we must first be honest with ourselves and evaluate where we stand in terms of our desires in life. It is very likely and natural that we would have some Artha and Kāma desires along with having a desire for Moksha. It is important to accept them and not try to bury them as that will lead to agitation. Once we understand this, we can then begin to evaluate our desires through different lenses provided by Vedānta.

## Choosing the Nature of Desires

Firstly, we should check if our desires are binding or non-binding in nature. Binding desires are those which lead to agitation of the mind due to our attachment to them and trap us in a cycle of suffering. Sometimes we must stop ourselves from blindly satisfying these desires. For instance, imagine we really love the feel of cashmere sweaters. We already have a few at home, but we see a new color in the shop. It is very expensive and we do not have the money for it, but we go ahead and max out yet another credit card to buy the pleasurable thing we cannot afford and will feel guilty about later. When we understand this desire for the greedy pleasure of having more expensive clothes than we need or can afford, we know this is a binding desire that will cause us more suffering and will choose not to act on this desire.

Non-binding desires are those which are pursued dharmically and they do not trap us into a cycle of generating more desires. Even when we experience a natural desire that is binding, we can find a way to satisfy it in a non-binding way. For example, say we crave sweets. Before our higher mind can stop us when we have had enough, we greedily eat up too much of whatever packaged and synthetic sugar we can find, and then we feel physically and mentally sick later. Alternatively, to satisfy our desire for something sweet in a non-binding way, we can bake or purchase fresh cookies made with healthy organic ingredients and sit quietly, savoring the pleasure of the taste and stopping when we know we have had enough. We will feel satisfied and in control of our desires, not plunged again into a cycle of suffering by them.

Vedānta is practical in that it places Dharma as a foundation for first satisfying Artha and Kama, while the desire for Moksha will reveal itself once these basic needs are sufficiently satisfied dharmically. If a human being is constantly struggling with putting food on plate, then how will the thought of liberation come? Hence it is important to fulfill our worldly desires so that a spiritual desire may bloom. It is important to note that though Moksha is also a desire, it is a desire of the highest kind.

By emphasizing Dharma first, Vedānta teaches us to meet our desires ethically and not in an unchecked manner. Once we are mentally calm and not agitated with innumerable desires, can we walk the road to Moksha. Otherwise we will be constantly swaying from one desire to another, leading to us falling away from our ultimate goal. A person with unchecked desires will get agitated due to their attachment of wanting the desire to be fulfilled.

Choosing non-binding desires is satisfying our desires while aligned with the law of "Karma Yoga". Karma Yoga, teaches us to become like a gardener in the field of life. It teaches us to put our intention into sowing the seeds of dharmic action, watering them, providing the right nutrition to the soil but not be attached to the outcome of that effort. The sprouting of the seed depends on various factors with some not being in our control. A gardener can only focus on doing what it can and not get into an argument with the weather as to why it rained when it was supposed to shine. Planting is in our hand and not the sprouting. With effort the seeds will eventually sprout hence there is no point being upset about anything. Our effort has to be in the nature of the seeds we plant and the process of nurturing them, not the outcome. For example, suppose we have a desire for professional success. To satisfy this urge, we work hard, are respectful of our coworkers, go for extra training as needed, and bring our best attitude to the office each day. We pursue success without cheating or taking credit for others' work to get ahead at any cost. Contentment and Self-approval fills us as we see ourselves move up the professional ladder and this desire does not trap us in unhealthy thought patterns or bring about other binding desires in us. This Dharmic approach to actions in life is liberating and "Not Binding". This keeps us motivated and persistent. As we keep planting seeds of karma with actions that are non-binding pursuits of our desires, over lifetimes the inevitable garden of our desires will transform overall into a field naturally full of non-binding desires.



## Choosing the Quality of Our Desires

Second, we must evaluate if our desire are *sāttvic*, *tamasic* or *rajasic* in nature. Sāttvic desires are ones which not only support us but also those around us. Tamasic desires are one which are self destructive, for example, a diabetic patient knows that it must not eat sweets but still eats them as he or she is refusing to listen to their intellect which knows better. Rajasic desires are one which make one work only for self-good. For example, suppose we cooked a dish which we really like but in order to prevent it from being shared, we hide it in the fridge and only eat it in absence of others. Hence once we are aware of this, we must evaluate from what place our desire is coming from. We can meet our desire to earn money but not by stealing someone else's or causing someone else any harm. If we earn ethically and also share our abundance with others to whatever capacity we can, for example, by helping an organization working with animals, then it not only helps us but also the society at large. Sometimes it may be important to let go of some desires as they run counter to our spiritual aims in life.

Gradually this process will lead to contentment and a stable state of mind which will help us on our path to Moksha. Acharya Shunya gave an example from her own life. She said that when she started her Ayurveda practice, she would accept payments from her patients for the clinic sessions to fulfill her artha and kāma needs. She did not suppress her artha and kāma needs but pursued them ethically. She earned through her clinical practice and helped the patients on their path to physical and mental health. Since she practiced Karma Yoga and always placed Dharma before pursuing her desires, gradually as time went on her artha and kāma needs were stably being met, she went to a state where she no longer "needed" that cheque but the urge sometimes came from within to write a cheque to a patient in need or give free medications. Hence filtering our desires through the sieve of Dharma to see what is binding us and what is setting us free and pursuing our desires by following Karma Yoga brings us closer to our ultimate goal of Moksha.

# Lineage Story

## How the Soul Shines in the Night

Acharya Shunya



The following is a selection from  
Acharya Shunya’s book,  
*Ayurveda Lifestyle Wisdom*.



One night I woke up suddenly to a lot of commotion and confusion. My mother had become sick due to the weak heart that she was born with. My sister was crying, our father looked worried, and though Baba was serene, he was meditating outside my parents’ room, instead of his usual place in the family temple or outside under the courtyard tree. Mother looked like she was sleeping peacefully, but apparently she had fainted.

Then my aunt took my sister and me to her room and sang spiritual songs, appealing to the formless power behind all forms for my mother’s recovery and, at the same time, soothing us with her melodious voice. My sister and I held each other tight for comfort and finally drifted back to sleep, with our heads in our aunt’s lap.

Though the night ended with my mother getting better, still the disturbance and fear left lasting impressions on my young mind. I didn’t appreciate this scary surprise at all. I simply wanted my mother to be her usual, calm, strong and smiling, busy, bustling self at all times, as all eight-year-olds in this world want.

I developed a fear of the night. In daylight, all was well, but as night slowly approached and the sun began to set, I would feel a dread. “Will my mother fall sick again tonight?”

So many things that I knew by the light of the sun began to feel unfamiliar in the darkness of the night - the water drums that caught and stored rainwater; my Baba’s hand-carved, wooden armchair; the empty cage of Mitthoo, the parrot we children had freed within hours after being given him because Baba told us we should never cage any living creature; and even my own beloved rope swing, which had been hung from the trees by my father. All of these household items and others, well-known by the day, took on menacing shapes and personalities in the dark of the night.

Many a night I would wake up and lie in my bed paralyzed with fear. Then, of course, it was harder to wake up in the morning for the walk to the river, and sometimes I would drag my feet while Baba’s shakti carried me back and forth to the River Sarayu.

Baba, I know, was aware of all this, and one morning he looked me in the eyes and said, “You know, little Shunya, at night the sun never really goes away. It is only the revolving of the Earth that makes us have an experience of darkness. But this darkness never stays. The darkness is not real. Only light is the Truth. Light is always there, always present. Light is behind and beneath and through the darkness, so darkness does not stand a chance. It is only an appearance, a temporary reality, a passing phenomenon. Light is Truth. Light is the absolute, eternal, unchanging Ultimate Reality. Light always was, is, and will be.”

As Baba talked on, I felt comforted. What my child’s mind heard is that light, not darkness, is Truth. And I knew that this light dwelled in my heart and in mother’s heart too. I knew that I was made up of light and that even sickness was a part of this light. The light is all things without itself being affected by any of its forms.

Baba’s words conveyed his blessings to my heart, and slowly, the worries about my mother’s health that I had internalized began to lift.

Baba asked my mother, who was now feeling much better, and my aunt to make sure that every evening I massaged my feet, my ears, and the top of my head with warm sesame oil, as he had taught me. So my mother and aunt sat beside my bed at night for several weeks so that I didn’t rush through the practice but applied the oil slowly and deliberately. When I would begin this practice, I’d start feeling sleepy almost at once; my hands would feel heavy as the oil entered my body and calmed vata dosha and rajas, the mental quality of turbulence. This made room in me for sleep.

Also, my mother would chant many of my favorite bedtime mantras to me:

**Asto ma sad gamayah**  
**Tamaso ma jyotir gamayah**  
**Mrityor ma aritam gamayah**

Translated, this means:

May I journey in consciousness from untruth to truth,  
From darkness to light, from fear of mortality of my body  
To recognizing my indestructible, immortal Self.

One night, when I was struggling a bit more than usual with falling asleep, Baba came to the room where my sister and I slept, and he chanted the greatest of Vedic mantras, the Gāyatrī mantra. Baba sang very softly, uttering each syllable with a power that landed in my heart like a million-volt electric charge. Then with great gentleness, he lightly touched the top of my head. I seemed to be suspended halfway between the waking world and the world of dreams. I experienced waves of comfort, reassurance, and a tremendous, inexplicable joy. Baba reminded me then that the Great Light of Atman, the Self, dwells inside me, right in my heart. “The Atman makes you all-powerful and truly invincible. Remember that,” he said.

And I did.

Baba said, “Use this light to welcome the divine darkness of nighttime. Fear not the night. The goddess of sleep will nurture you carefully as you sleep, and then you can wake up with renewed energy to grow and serve the world. Rest now, so Mother Sleep can heal and rejuvenate you.”

From that night onward, my fears were gone. The fears had fled, and I experienced the peace that is my natural state. I seemed to have become one with the Gāyatrī mantra. I became firm in the conviction that my true nature is greater than the darkness I could see at night - a darkness that is here to serve me, after all.

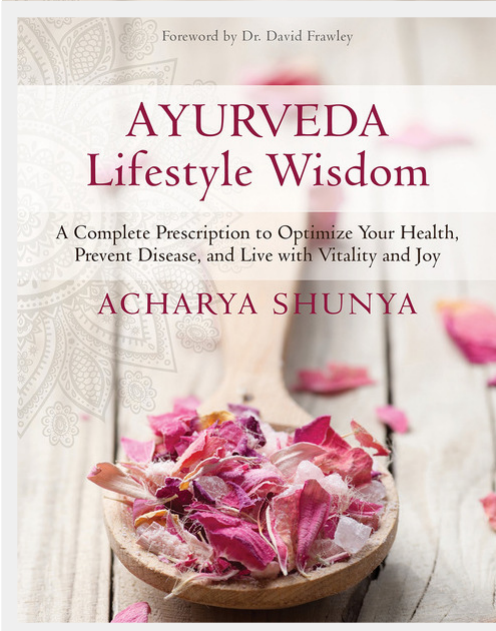
As for the monsters I saw in household items, the next time one of them stared at me through my bedroom window, I closed my eyes and focused on the light in my heart. I became so powerful and potent that the monsters revealed themselves in the light shining through my eyes to be no more than what they were. I felt that these “fearsome” water drums were actually rather lonely and were waiting out the night in anticipation of the morning, when I could come play hide and seek with my sister and my cousins around them once again.

Each evening, after my elders had chanted and left my room, I would gently await a different mother. Her name is Bhutadhatri, the Mother of the Universe, the Goddess of Sleep. She wears dark, flowing robes, soft and studded with infinite stars, and she holds us all like babies as we sleep. We are vulnerable then but filled with hope for a new morning. Because she is there with us, we are never alone. We can trust, and let go, let ourselves drop into sleep. My breathing would become very quiet with long pauses between each breath, and soon sleep would envelop me, ever so gently.

One night, between a breath in and a breath out, I observed my own true being. In this precious state, I could see that I was not even dependent on my body to experience my own light. This light is beyond the body. The light outlives the body. It is beyond day and night, beyond life and death. I could see then that my mother was not just her failing heart. Even mother’s sickness was simply a temporary night in an eternal, unending, totally amazing light-filled reality.

This excerpt comes from Acharya  
Shunya’s book, *Ayurveda Lifestyle  
Medicine*, available on [Amazon.com](#)

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# Personal Reflection:

"Shadow and Light"

by Sukhdeep Kaur



Shadow and Light, aspects of our life.  
Ego to eternal light, a strife, life after life.

The play of shadow can sway or excite,  
create an entire show, night after night.

Shadows come and go due to the light,  
somewhere low, somewhere bright.

The inner glow offers some insight.  
and we steadily plow towards the light.

As we grow closer to the light,  
we diminish the shadow and are ready to ignite.

Though the candlestick still casts a shadow,  
the lit up wick can no longer do so.

Merging with light it becomes the light.  
Such is the glow, the candle too stays no more

and the light melts its shadow.  
Warmth and glow melt the ego.

But were it not for the shadow, would we know the light,  
play with the transient shadow, strive for eternal light?

for where there is eternal glow and forever bright,  
there is no shadow, there is no light.

# Sanskrit Words

## Glossary



**ahamkāra** : ego, sense of I-ness  
**anādi** : without beginning or end, eternally existing  
**artha** : material wealth, refers to the material needs of survival (food, shelter, etc.)  
**Ātman** : the eternal and indestructible Self, refers to Brahman dwelling in all beings  
**āvarana** : covering faculty of māyā  
**bhāva** : feeling, emotional attitude  
**Brahman** : the One Universal Consciousness that is both experiencing and manifesting all of creation as the innermost reality; the underlying spiritual reality  
**buddhi** : all of the intellect, memory and ego  
**chikitsa** : therapy  
**dharma** : righteousness, duty, noble values  
**gunas** : the three primordial qualities (sattva, rajas and tamas) that make up all of manifested reality, they are the subtle, essential substances making up māyā  
**guru** : a spiritual teacher  
**kāma** : pleasure, enjoyment  
**Karma yoga** : an attitude toward activity that is without expectation of reward or attachment to certain outcomes  
**kula** : a spiritual family  
**māyā** : the changing reality superimposed onto objective reality  
**moksha** : the destruction of delusion, clear and total knowing what is eternal and non-eternal  
**neti-neti** : a methodical practice of discriminating between what is the Self and what is temporary and impermanent.

**rajas** : the guna of movement and transformation  
**sāadhanā** : voluntary dedicated discipline to reach self-determined spiritual goals  
**Sāadhanā Chatushtayam** : a series of conscious behaviors a student of Vedānta cultivates so they can progress on their spiritual path  
**sākshi** : witness, observer  
**sampradāya** : spiritual lineage imparting knowledge of the Self  
**satchitānanda** : a combination of three words used to describe Brahman, meaning eternal consciousness and bliss  
**satsangha** : gathering of students to hear spiritual discourses from a spiritual teacher  
**sattva** : the guna of clarity, knowledge, harmony  
**sevā** : selfless service  
**shāstra** : sacred texts revealing the Self  
**shaucham** : purity, cleanliness  
**tamas** : the guna of inertia  
**Upāsana yoga** : behavior and worship practices to bring us closer to knowing the Self  
**vairagya** : dispassion, non-attachment  
**vidya** : knowledge, also word for any of the vedic sciences  
**vinaya** : Vedic customs  
**viveka** : discrimination between what is eternal and non-eternal.

Sanskrit words have been transliterated from the original Devanāgarī using a blend of phonetic spellings and diacritical marks. We have tried to use a format that will allow a reader who may not be very familiar with technical standardized Sanskrit transliteration to read the articles naturally and intuitively understand a close approximation of the pronunciation of the words.



# Meet This Issues Writers



**Aparna Amy Lewis**  
*Contributing Writer,  
Dean of Vedic Studies*

Aparna Amy Lewis is the Dean of the Spiritual Studies program at Vedika Global and a life member of Acharya Shunya’s Vedic Ecclesiastical Council. As Dean, Aparna articulates how the central tenets of ancient Vedic spirituality will be upheld, nurtured and archived in a classroom setting. She oversees ethical and cultural leadership for the community of member students, and teaches students as an appointed professor of Vedic Ethics, Vinay and Dharma studies, and Spiritual Discipline (*9-Step Advaita Vedanta Sadhana*). She oversees scripture-based program development, counsels students on their spiritual life journeys, and mentors volunteers in offering selfless service (*seva*). Aparna writes regularly for *The Hamsa Magazine*, the official publication of the Spiritual Studies Program, is working on a Sadhana Book for Acharya Shunya’s students, co-teaches retreats and spiritual classes, and is involved in setting up a global online archive of Acharya Shunya’s spiritual teachings for posterity.

Aparna’s internal commitment is to the central truth of Advaita Vedanta – that we are all one. This inspires her to lead a life of service to this truth. Aparna was ordained into Acharya Shunya’s Vedic lineage in 2009, and since then, she has supported her Guru’s message, full time, in various key portfolios, including as Dean since 2014.



**Ishani Naidu**  
*Editor in Chief*

A student of Acharya Shunya since 2009, Ishani is a Vedika Certified Ayurveda Health Educator. She serves as Editor in Chief of The Hamsa Magazine. Ishani now lives in Coimbatore, India with her two small children and husband. In her free time she writes stories for children exploring themes of Ayurveda and Vedanta, and volunteers in schools and colleges teaching kids, teens and adults Ayurveda as a body mind and soul health science.



**Sakshi Joanne  
Banuelos**  
*Contributing Writer*

Sakshi has been on a spiritual path for nearly twenty years, she has been a student of Shunyaji's since 2014. Along the way Sakshi has studied hatha yoga and earned her 500 hour certification in 2009. Sakshi has always loved art and created and participated in Craft Shows with her small polymer clay creations. She has had a long career as a mechanical drafter in the laser medical field and will soon be retiring. She looks forward to more seva with her teacher and spending time cultivating a simple, quiet life at home.



**Sukhdeep Kaur**  
*Contributing Writer*

Sukhdeep Kaur has been studying with Acharya Shunya since 2015 and is a member of the Vedika Gurukulum. She is a member of National Ayurvedic Medical Association as a Certified Ayurvedic Practitioner and a Registered Yoga Alliance teacher. She works for a corporation as an Attorney and also volunteers her time as an Attorney, Ayurveda Practitioner and Yoga Teacher. She enjoys teaching to learn, writing, and living the Ayurvedic and Yogic wisdom.



**Vidya Deepa Gupta**  
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Vidya Deepa Gupta is a Vedika Certified Ayurveda Health Educator who started studying with Acharya Shunya in 2012. She performs sevā as part of Vedika’s Audio/Video team, writes for the The Hamsa Magazine and leads a special mantra chanting group as part of Vedika’s Spiritual Studies Program.

Outside of Vedika, Vidya works as a software engineer with Nokia. She has a Bachelor’s degree in Electronics from Delhi University and Master’s degrees in Information and Communication Sciences from Delhi University and in Computer Science from North Carolina State University.

## About the Magazine Title, 'The Hamsa'

Just as the swan (Hamsa in Sanskrit) lives on water, but its feathers are never wet, similarly, an Advaita Vedāntin (follower of Advaita Vedānta) dwells in the Māyā-filled Samsāra, fulfilling all duties, but remains untouched and unpolluted by Māyā. Such a one is called a spiritual Hamsa. Vedic seekers must effort to emulate Hamsa-like ideals in their personal lives.

