

# **Sovereign Self**

# What's in it for me? A new look at an ancient recipe for authentic living

Thousands of years ago, in ancient India, sages recorded the wisdom that had been revealed to them. The result was the Vedas – a timeless meditation on the big questions of existence, such as “Who am I really?” and “Why aren’t I happier?” These blinks draw on Acharya Shunya’s guide to the wisdom of these classic texts, providing answers that remain every bit as relevant in today’s world as they were in ancient India. According to these texts, achieving happiness and avoiding suffering requires that we accept who we really are. How? That’s just what we’ll be exploring in these blinks. You’ll also learn

why so many of our ideas of happiness are mirages; how to tell healthy desires from unhealthy ones; and why praising people you usually criticize gives you peace of mind.

## Wisdom begins with knowledge of the self.

The Vedas are a set of religious texts which originated in ancient India. Although they’re revered by Hindus, they predate Hinduism. They also play a major role in other religious traditions in the Indian subcontinent, such as Jainism and Buddhism. Divided into four books called the Rig-Veda, Sama-Veda, Yajur-Veda, and Atharva-Veda, they address age-old questions about the nature of existence, suffering, fulfillment, and the afterlife. The answers to these questions are said to be without a human author. Instead, this transcendental wisdom was revealed over the ages to male and female sages known as rishis and rishikas. At the heart of this wisdom is an extended meditation on the nature of the self, which the Vedas regard as the key to spiritual freedom. The key message here is: Wisdom begins with knowledge of the self. The word Veda means knowledge in Sanskrit. And, broadly speaking, the Vedas are interested in two different kinds of knowledge. The first is known as dharma, or ethics – knowledge of how to behave justly. The second is knowledge of the true self, which the Vedas call atman. Atman is what connects you to the infinite – the reality of existence, because as the Vedas put it, the self of the individual and the self of the universe are identical. To discover atman, which is a source of complete wisdom and joy, is to live in harmony with this ultimate reality. Atman is always there, waiting to be discovered, even when your mind is clouded or your happiness seems blocked. Awakening to this true self isn’t a journey outward toward something new – it’s a journey inward toward something that’s always been there. Put differently, discovering the self is about remembering who you already are. The reason it’s hard to see this is simple: humans spend too much time worrying about the external, material world of people and objects rather than looking inward. That external world, however, is a distraction. As a sage puts it in a famous passage, “the self alone is worthy of seeing, hearing, contemplating, and realizing, because the self alone is the supreme truth.” The rewards of this spiritual quest are great. When you rediscover and reclaim your forgotten self, you are freed from the desires that keep you trapped in a cycle of suffering. And to exit this state of frenzied and unfulfilled being is to discover a deep sense of purpose, belonging, and well-being.

# You find joy when you stop looking for it outside of yourself.

The Vedas tell a story about a king who built a palace of mirrors. At its center, in a courtyard, he placed a rare and beautiful rose which was reflected in hundreds of different mirrors. One day, the king released a pigeon in his palace. Enchanted by the rose, it spent weeks trying to find the flower. But each attempt failed. The pigeon banged its beak on mirror after mirror. Eventually, it grew sorrowful. It's efforts had been in vain. The rose was nothing but a mirage. The pigeon lost its desire. It stopped its anxious fluttering and returned to earth. And as it did so, it alighted on the rose in the courtyard. This poetic passage isn't really about pigeons, mirrors, and roses, of course – it's a metaphor for your futile search for happiness. The key message here is: You find joy when you stop looking for it outside of yourself. According to the Vedas, happiness is found within the self. In other words, you are your happiness. As the Bhagavad Gita, another revered Hindu text, puts it, a person who is happy has "achieved the self." In other words, authentically being yourself brings joy. Unfortunately, all too often, humans are like that pigeon, which represents the ego. Happiness, you think, is "out there" – that is, in the external world, in a fashionable wardrobe, more sex, or a slice of chocolate cake. It'll come to you when you earn more, buy a house, or find a soulmate. These things aren't happiness, though – they're mirages. The futility of flapping around in pursuit of such things becomes clear when you achieve the things you thought would make you happy. You grow tired of the lover's body that once obsessed you. Your supposed soulmate snores. The cake is soon finished. And so the pursuit resumes and you continue banging your head on mirrors. The Vedas contrast this restless search for happiness in the external world with ananda – the inner joy of the true self. Ananda doesn't require external, pleasure-giving objects. And, unlike sensory pleasures, it doesn't fade over time. What does ananda look like? Put simply, it's a state of non-desiring, where you don't crave anything and are content to simply be. Think back to the pigeon. It found its rose when it stopped searching. It's the same with happiness: you find it when you give up on restlessly pursuing happiness in the world outside you.

## Suffering is a choice.

There are two levels of existence. The first is the world you share with other people and objects. This is called jagat. It's neither good nor bad – it doesn't cause joy or misery. It simply is. Yet joy and misery exist nonetheless; so does suffering. So where do they come from, if not the world itself? Simply put, you create them. How? Well, you don't engage with jagat on its own terms. Instead, you judge it by your own, subjective standards, beliefs, hopes, and expectations. This kind of personal mythology is called samsara, and it's the second level of existence. When jagat doesn't meet these standards, you feel sorrow and suffer. But expecting it to conform to your ideals is a mistake. When you accept things as they are, you see that you don't have to suffer. The key message here is: Suffering is a choice. There are seven billion people on our planet. Every one of us is constantly creating and dissolving samsara – our subjective, myth-based views of the world that we share with others. That's seven billion bundles of likes and dislikes, ideas, reflexives, hang-ups, and deep-seated mental patterns. It's no surprise, then, that people respond so differently to virtually identical circumstances. Imagine two people who've been laid off from their jobs. Economically speaking, they're

in the same boat, so this setback has the same impact on both their lives. The first takes the loss of her job in stride. Sure, it's hardly ideal, and finding a new position will take time and effort. But she understands her situation as a long-overdue push to try something new. In her words, it's a "sign from the universe." The second person feels differently. He's upset and ashamed – if he'd worked harder, he thinks, he'd still have a job. Then the resentment kicks in. He remembers all the times he's been victimized. Why him and not his worthless colleagues? It's just not fair! This is his personal samsara, and slowly but surely it sends him into a spiral of suffering. It isn't the reality of the situation that's made the difference here – it's the subjective response that's led one person to suffer more than the other. The Vedas depict samsara as a state of hypnosis. Once we're in it, it's hard to get out. The only way to avoid this trap is to accept jagat on its own terms.

## **Cultivate healthy desires and you'll be much happier.**

What's the connection between the mind and suffering? The Vedas' answer is that it's in the mind that we experience desire, which is the root of unhappiness. Desires are unconscious drives. When they rise to the surface of the conscious mind, they take the form of cravings. Whether the desire is for nicotine, fame, sex, or revenge, these cravings direct you away from your inner self and toward the external world – that distracting palace of mirrors we've already encountered. The only way out of this trap is to pay closer attention to the nature of your desires. The key message here is: Cultivate healthy desires and you'll be much happier. Not all desires are the same; in fact, the Vedas distinguish between healthy and unhealthy ones. The latter, which are called *vasanas*, are the cause of mental restlessness. These desires are compulsive – they demand to be fulfilled. Whether the object of desire is ice cream, a promotion, a new car, or a lover, *vasanas* are directed toward things you believe will make you happy. *Vasanas* send your mind into overdrive. Every thought obsessively revolves around the object of desire. Attaining that object doesn't bring rest, though. Like an addict, you immediately go in search of the next scoop of ice cream, another lover, or an even bigger car. How can you escape this feedback loop? Interestingly, the Vedas don't call for you to renounce all earthly desires. Instead, they urge you to cultivate healthy desires, or *purusharthas*. These are non-binding. Consider the difference between, say, a desire for a cup of chai and a desire for a cigarette. You may love drinking chai, but it's unlikely you'll feel irritable if this desire surfaces and you can't find a chai shop. Smokers, by contrast, are consumed by suffering if they can't fulfill their desire. Binding desires aren't just about chemical addiction, and even non-binding desires can become binding. Take it from the author, who got into the habit of taking afternoon naps. At first, this was a simple pleasure. Over time, however, she noticed that she became annoyed if a visiting friend or a chore got in the way of her nap. Napping no longer served her well-being – it had become a compulsion. If you notice this happening, drop the habit for a while. For a month, the author resisted her craving for a nap and read a book or went for a walk instead. Soon, the binding nature of this desire disappeared.

## **Discovering your true self will help you build better relationships.**

Union is a powerful idea. From the notion of a union with God to the union of partners in marriage and the search for soulmates, it's an aspiration that resonates in both secular and religious contexts. How, though, should we think about union in light of what we've been discussing so far – the discovery of the self? Isn't there a contradiction here? Doesn't union dissolve the self into something greater? Not at all. According to the Vedas, knowing the self is the foundation of a strong union. The key message here is: Discovering your true self will help you build better relationships. To address questions about the self and union, the Vedas use the Sanskrit term yoga, which means union or "yoking." True yoga happens when you look for an equal partner in life. Relationships go wrong when you seek the wrong things from them – for example, looking for someone to take care of your emotional fulfillment. Once you believe it's someone else's job to fulfill your needs, you outsource your well-being. This isn't a viable long-term plan. Even if you managed to find someone who could satisfy your deepest needs, there's no guarantee they'll always be around to shoulder that task. Relationships, after all, are transient. Lovers or partners can disappoint or betray you. They can even die on you. That's why it's so important to step up to the plate and take responsibility for your own happiness, which is where viyoga comes in. Viyoga literally means "separation," but it can more accurately be translated as emotional detachment. Viyoga is intimately related to yoga. In fact, the Vedas say that to achieve yoga, you have to strive for viyoga first. Viyoga is all about cultivating the most important relationship of all – the relationship you have with your own self. Think of it as an exercise in self-definition. Ask yourself: Who am I? What are my values? What are my goals? Which issues are negotiable and which are non-negotiable in my life? When you embark on this journey toward your true self, you'll discover your gifts, needs, and priorities. These are the foundations of your power – the power that's all too often squandered on manipulative relationships begun without prior self-reflection. Remember, too, that this isn't selfishness or indifference. Viyoga is about taking a step back, but that's how you'll achieve true yoga.

## **Meditation is the best way of getting in touch with your true self.**

Finding your true self, as we've seen, is all about calming your restless mind and halting the cycle of thoughts and desires. The oldest technique for achieving this state of mind is meditation. Broadly speaking, there are two different schools of thought when it comes to meditation. One, which is practiced by spiritual adepts, aims to completely silence all waves of thought. That's a high bar to clear, of course. Enter a second tradition, which goes back to around 500 BCE. Rather than attempting to banish all thoughts, it tries to change the content of thoughts. The key message here is: Meditation is the best way of getting in touch with your true self. According to the Upanishads, the last section of the Vedas, we become what we believe. When we contemplate an idea which reveals our true selves, that idea becomes part of us. This is one of the purposes of meditation. Let's see how it works. You can meditate any way you like. You can do it when you wake up or before going to bed. You can sit in a chair or lie down. For this meditation, you'll start by choosing a thought to contemplate. You'll want to choose one that will help reveal your true self and which also resonates with you. If you're struggling with fear, for example, "I am fearless" is a wonderful thought to start with. Other options could be thoughts like "I use a body, but I am not the body" or "I am peaceful." Now get comfortable and close your eyes. Picture a tortoise withdrawing into its shell. Like that tortoise, you're withdrawing your attention from everything around



you and channeling your focus inward. Imagine a light, warm and radiant, emanating from the center of your forehead. Take your time and visualize this comforting light in great detail. You should feel yourself growing more restful, relaxed, and self-accepting. Now you can turn your mind to your chosen thought. Dwell on it and gently return to it when you find your mind straying. As you focus your attention, the thought of fearlessness will become a feeling. Allow yourself to experience and savor it. What's it like to be fearless? Sit with this sensation. Bit by bit, you'll feel yourself becoming fearless – a feeling that you'll now be able to bring to bear on problems in your life.

## **Meditation isn't the only way of changing your thoughts for the better.**

Like a tortoise withdrawing its head into its shell, you withdraw your attention from the world when you meditate. This is a great way of calming your mind and changing the nature of your thoughts. Chances are, that's not something you'll be able to do all day long, though – you've got bills to pay, kids to feed, and chores to take care of, after all. What you need, then, is a technique to help you keep in touch with your true self even when you're not meditating. The key message here is: Meditation isn't the only way of changing your thoughts for the better. What should you do when you encounter negative thoughts? As we've seen, these thoughts can trigger a cycle that's hard to escape. To avoid this pitfall, the Vedas recommend a technique called pratipaksha bhavana, which in Sanskrit means “opposite emotion.” The idea is this. When you have a thought that sucks you into this trap, simply – and deliberately – think the opposite. Call it deliberate opposite thoughts. For example, if you find yourself constantly criticizing someone, think of a sincere compliment. Or say you constantly put yourself down in front of others and minimize your achievements. Go out of your way to acknowledge praise and take credit where it's due. Continue through your personal list of negative thoughts. If you're jealous, be appreciative of others' successes. If you're conceited, be humble. You can reinforce this technique by extending it to actions. When you see yourself being inconsiderate, make a gesture of accommodation and compromise. When you observe yourself being slothful – for example, by avoiding doing the dishes – go straight into the kitchen and clean up. If you're wasting time scrolling social media, open a book or watch an informative documentary instead. Every time you change your thought or action into its opposite, you're removing control from your lower self and redelegating it to your higher self – that is, to your sovereign self. With practice, this becomes second nature. The benefits are huge. Instead of defaulting to overwhelming negative thoughts, you'll see yourself as an agent for positive change in the world. Best of all, you'll be showing your mind who's boss! And there you have it – the ancient wisdom of the Vedas, updated for today's world. Now you can open a new chapter in your life and start discovering your true self.

## **Final summary**

The key message in these blinks is that: The Vedas are a manual for self-discovery and spiritual liberation. Discovering the true self through a journey inward, they teach, is a recipe for true happiness, one that begins with the realization that happiness can't be found in the external world. Chasing these mirages of joy, in fact, is what causes suffering. Calming the mind through meditation, abandoning unhealthy desires, and practicing positivity rather than negativity are stepping stones on the path away from

such suffering and toward genuine happiness. And here's some more actionable advice: Remember nature's simplicity in your struggle to be yourself. Nature is simple and unpretentious; it doesn't try to be something that it isn't. Daffodils don't try to be roses and apple trees don't try to grow mangoes. So when you find yourself worrying what others are doing, and questioning whether you ought to follow their lead, take a deep breath and remember this timeless lesson nature has given us: it's OK to be who you are! Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to [email protected] with Sovereign Self as the subject line and share your thoughts!