

Avidyā – “Self” or “self”? *That’s where it’s at man!*

- **Summary**

Avidyā, or ignorance, is a case of mistaken identity, confusing the “self” as the mind-body, rather than the “Self” of pure consciousness. It leads to a range of afflictions and suffering but can be removed and avoided by using the intellect (buddhi) to discern (viveka) true permanent identity and let go (vairāgya) of the temporary illusion of self.

- **The meaning of avidyā. – Ignorance of what? The nature of “Self”.**

Avidyā is the first of the five kleśas, or mental afflictions, found in Pātañjali’s yoga sūtras (P.2.3), that occur from the ripples of the mind (the citta vrtti – P.1.5). Often translated as ignorance or nescience, in yoga it has a much deeper meaning directed to one’s perception and conditioning of identity and reality. In fact, without it there would be no need for yoga!

Avidyā literally means “absence of light”, also called ajñāna (or spelled agyana) – absence of wisdom, lack of knowledge, or lack of awareness.

In yoga, it means ignorance of the “true nature of the Self”. And it is this that defines yoga from other systems of truth-seeking (epistemologies). We’re not talking about worldly facts and figures. It’s about distinguishing your temporary material identity (the mind-body - svarūpa), and the external Universe of the five elements (bhūtas) and three gunas that feeds your experiences, from the property of pure consciousness that enlightens you into sentient awareness. Avidyā is a “case of mistaken identity” – “Self” or “self”.

The opposite is called vidya, jñāna (gyāna), adhyātma, which roughly means realisation of the true nature of reality.

- **How does avidyā fit in to yoga? – The yoga sūtras and other yoga texts.**

The five kleśas, or mental afflictions, are found in Pātañjali’s yoga sūtras (P.2.3). P.2.5 defines avidyā as “regarding the impermanent as permanent, the impure as pure, the painful as pleasant, and the non-Self as the Self”. P.2.4 considers avidyā to be the root or basis for the other four kleśas: asmitā – ego/ “I”-sense, rāga – attachment, dvesha – aversion, and abhinivesah – clinging to life / fear of death (or loss or change).

This “Self” has numerous names and connotations. When embodied by a person it is named Ātman, also a jīva, which is any living organism enspirited with Ātman.

Pātañjali’s yoga sūtras lay out a guide for un-covering (rather than discovering) Ātman. Ātman is also the central idea in all of the Upaniṣads. These short texts state that the essence of every person's being is not the body, nor the mind, nor the ego, but the eternal, unchanging Ātman, in union (“yoga”) with pure universal consciousness. The main message is connection between the “self” and “Self”, internal and external, small and large, life and Cosmos.

Qualities of “Self” vs “self”

Self	self
Vidyā, jñāna (wisdom, realisation)	Avidyā, ajñāna (ignorance, nescience)
Ātman / jīva (personal), Puruṣa, Īśvara, Śiva, Brahman	Anātma, Prakṛti, Śakti, Māyā
Satchitānanda – Truth/Reality, consciousness, bliss / love	Afflicted by karma, saṁskāras, vāsanās, kleśa, samsara
Pure universal consciousness	Physical body, mind, energy/prana (3x sarira, 5x kosha)
Pure – unconditioned	Impure – conditioned. I, me, my, mine
Noumenal, unmanifest – not of the gunas	Phenomenal, manifest – of the triguna – sattva, rajas, tamas
Beyond the senses and awareness, immaterial, imperceptible	Of the elements, senses and awareness, material, perceptible
Singularity, non-duality, unity, indivisible	Diversity, dualities, subject-object, divisible
Eternal, timeless, without beginning or end	Temporal, impermanent, beginning and ending
Full, whole, complete, abundant, boundless, infinite	Seeking, grasping, lacking, limited, bound, constrained
Inactive, inert	Active, dynamic
Always the subject (the Seer) – never the object (cannot be “seen” – only inferred through reflection)	Can be subject (seer), object (the seen) and process (seeing)
The “Knower” (Bhagavad Gītā, Chapter 13)	The “field”, the (BG Ch13)
Om, pranavah	Object-artha, name/sound-sabda, concept/idea-pratyaya
Yoga (union), e.g. transcends ego	Bhogā (experience), e.g. exercise of mind-body & senses
Bliss, samadhi (superconscious, beyond mind)	Pleasure, joy (temporary, sensory, sensual)

- **What causes avidyā? – Perception, thought and superimposition**

The five kleśas come from the activity of the mind, the citta vṛtti. The definitional Lakṣaṇa sūtra of Pātañjali (P.1.2) says: yogaś citta vṛtti nirodhaḥ – yoga is the restraint of the fluctuations of mind. So, what is “citta”? This comes from the yoga model of mind – the Antahkāraṇa (inner mental tool). In yoga, you only have one mind, comprising four constantly interacting modes:

- Buddhi – (also referred to as the “higher mind” or Sattva in Pātañjali – P.3.36, 3.50, 3.56) – the decisive, discerning, discriminative aspect, that observes and chooses. It is from here that one experiences “now” without the dualities of the conditioned ego. The place of jñāna. Sharp, clear, awakened, alert, calm, present - sattvic.
- Ahamkāra – the “I-maker” (or ego), actively identifies with discursive thoughts, sensations and experiences (“monkey-mind”). This is where illusions of “self”, dualities and dissatisfaction play out, such as attachment and aversion to past and future imaginings. Agitated, distracted, unattentive - rajasic; dull, woolly, lethargic - tamasic.
- Manas – (the “lower mind”) constantly receives and identifies experiences from the senses, reacts with impulse, and feeds citta.
- Citta – the storehouse of experiences that constantly bubble up as the five categories of the mindfield – the vṛttis (pramāṇa – knowledge of Reality/Truth, viparyaya – false knowledge, vikalpa – imagination, nidrā – deep sleep, and smṛti – memories). At a deeper level, it the storehouse (āśaya) of karmic imprints (saṁskāra).

The mind-body takes in experiences from contact with the physical world of Prakṛti to manas through the five senses (the indriya). This is all laid out in the model of the 25 tattvas, which explains how the mind, body and outside worlds evolve from Prakṛti and interact, all the while illuminated with conscious awareness from Puruṣa, the Ātman. Antahkāraṇa forms the inner, mental four parts of the tattvas.

Avidyā stems from the second category of citta vṛttis, false knowledge or misconception, viparyaya, defined as when knowledge of something is not based upon its true form (P.1.8). P.3.17 furthers this by describing the process of adhyāsa – or superimposition, leading to mistaken identity.

The classic analogy is of seeing a snake in the dark and recoiling in fear but, upon shining a light at it, seeing only a rope. Similarly, what, in the darkness of ignorance, seems like your identity, uncovered with the shining light of wisdom (jñāna) to be the Self of pure consciousness.

Adhyāropa (or deha adhyāsa) is the special case of adhyāsa, due to avidyā, where characteristics of the mind-body self (anātmā) are superimposed upon the Self (Ātman), appearing as the embodied jīva, and giving the impression of an identity subject to the limitations (upadhi) of the material world of Prakṛti, the five elements and the triguna (sattva, rāja and tamaś). Then one mistakenly identifies with the ego-mind-body and not the Ātman. It is due to adhyāropa that the real appears unreal and the unreal appears real (see Pātañjali definition of avidyā P.2.5).

The analogy is that of waves on the surface of the ocean. Waves appear to be separate (like ourselves) but really they emerge from and recede back into the energy of the vast deep ocean (Brāhman) – they are one and the same.

Adhyāropa works two ways, for two forms of avidyā. Firstly, by misidentifying the ego with the material world, and secondly by misidentifying Ātman as being of the material world – a thing, or an object that one has, rather than the essential nature of who you are. For example, to say “I have a soul”, expresses the second form. You cannot have what you always are.

The main obstacle to clear realisation is simply the limitations of the human body. We, as human mammals, have only five very limited senses, and a small soft wet body, through which the vast Universe is filtered. So, people have cleverly invented all sorts of instruments and tools to reinterpret and transmit the Universe to us – such as telescopes, microscopes, microphones, spectrometers and x-ray machines. Yet we are still limited and only able to sense and experience a miniscule proportion of the whole Universe.

Pātañjali 2.23 says - The relationship between the “Self” (Puruṣa) and the “self” (Prakṛti) is that of the owner and the owned, and this causes identification of the Self and not-Self.

P.2.24. The cause of that identification is ignorance (avidyā) [here - mistaking Prakṛti, body-mind “self”, for Ātman, personal pure consciousness “Self”].

- **Why is avidyā important? – dukkha, suffering, samsara**

It is due to this superimposition, *adhyāsa*, that the senses, through *manas*, feed experiences to *citta*. These arise as thoughts, ideas and feelings that reinforce the *ahamkāra* and give rise to the second *kleśa*, *asmitā*, the impression of an independent “I” (me, my and mine) who suffers the dualities of likes and dislikes, attractions and aversions, cravings and fears, possession and loss, joy and pain, relief and anxiety, past and future, memories and fantasies. My foot, my eyes, my body, my mind, my breath, my injuries, my emotions, my happiness, my age, my suffering. Whereas *Ātman*, pure universal consciousness, has no personal sense of “I”.

Yoga considers the *kleśas*, borne from *ahamkāra*, to be the cause of pleasure (*sukha*) and suffering (*dukkha*) (P.2.15), and this leads to a vicious cycle of “samsara”. One’s thoughts, speech and actions (*karmas*) create the conditions for experiences, which embed deeply in *citta* (or the *karma asaya* – the storehouse of experiences, P.2.12, within the yogic causal body, *kāraṇa śarīra*), as subliminal karmic impressions (*saṃskāras*) only to resurface as behavioural habits and tendencies (*vāsanās*) that create new cravings and aversions, new pleasures and pains. And so it goes, around and around, from that past life, to this life, to the next life (P.2.13 & P.2.14). This is how the mind becomes conditioned and limited.

So, how does any of this help your yoga? Good news. Suffering that has not yet come is avoidable (P.2.16).

Well, if the real you *is* *Ātman* and the impermanent mind-body is not, then *ahamkāra* - the mode of mind that drives *avidyā* – can be bypassed, and then the afflictions (*kleśas*) that arise from the activity of *vr̥tti* have nothing to hold onto, so there is no “I” or “me” to experience the suffering. These experiences are simply memories that have passed, or fantasies of the future, and have no relevance to the present moment – the ever-flowing Now.

A consequence of *avidyā* is that the “self” always seems incomplete, dissatisfied, lacking, wanting for more or wanting for change. However, the personal *Ātman* is always complete, whole and abundant, lacking and in need of nothing, and entirely integral with a shared universal consciousness. By shifting perspective, one can dwell in this abundance, the *sattvic* bliss that comes from “letting go”. Realising this abundance, and realising that it is the real state-of-being for all living creatures (*jīvas*), one can connect and share in the love, kindness and compassion of this precious human existence.

It’s worth pondering the first two limbs of *Pātañjali*’s eight limbs (the *aṣṭāu aṅgāni*) - the five *yamas* (or public restraints) and the five *niyamas* (the personal observances) in light of the realised “Self”.

For example: *satya* - honesty in thought, words and actions - it’s deeper levels of meaning refers to behaviours that align congruously with *sat-chit-ānanda*. *Svādhyāya* more accurately refers to study of the “Self” – texts, sutras, mantras and practices (*sadhanā*) that lift the veil. *Santoṣā*, or contentment, has at its source, the awareness that, as *Ātman*, you are already intrinsically, whole, full and complete, in need of or wanting for nothing – abundant, and connected in love, kindness and compassion with all living beings.

In yoga, this realisation of “Self” is the very means for breaking the eternal cycle of *samsara*, freedom from the impulsive, reactive cycle of action and reaction, cause and effect, condition and consequence. This is “*moksha*”, the guarantee that one’s collected *karmas* will not return to the form of another living being.

P.2.25. When this ignorance (*avidyā*) is absent, the identification is also removed, and the Self attains liberation (*kaivalya*). [That is, release of *Ātman*, *saṃskāras* and *karmas* from the otherwise eternal cycle of *samsara* – rebirth and material suffering. The final absorption of personal *Ātman* back into universal cosmic *Brahman*]. The analogy is of a wave receding back into the ocean.

- **What to do about avidyā – Lifting the veil**

A key purpose of yoga practice is to lift the “veil of ignorance” (*prakāśā avaraṇam* – P.2.52, 3.44) to reveal the “true Self” – *Ātman* – that is always there, obscured by the temporary illusion of “I”, “me”, “my” and “mine”. Much like drifting clouds obscure the vast sky and the radiant sunlight. Yoga is a process of “un-discovery” (rather than discovery). *Pātañjali* P.4.3 gives the analogy of a farmer who removes obstacles from a stream to allow the free flow of water, rather than striving, seeking, chasing high and higher goals (or more and more difficult *āsanas*!).

Similarly, yoga practice is simply to observe, identify and let go of obstacles in the mind-stream that obscure the single-pointed present moment (the ekagrata).

This process of uncovering includes observing the fluctuations of the mindfield, recognising how they are rooted in the deep impressions of past sensory experience, manifest as habits and patterns of thoughts, speech and behaviour, and then dissolving them, letting them arise and recede, in equanimity (upekṣā) without attraction or aversion.

The eight-limb path of Pātañjali is based on reversing or “involuting” the stages of the tattvas.

Pātañjali advises key techniques to calm the mindfield with an adherence to disciplined yoga practice (abhyāsa) and non-attachment (vairāgya) or simply “letting go” (P.1.12).

You do the opposite of superimposition by adopting the method of negation (apavāda), which involves observing and discerning (viveka), so the attributes of the body-mind are “let-go” to reveal the Self. This process is called Ātman -Anātman-viveka.

Pātañjali also offers tools to dissolve the kleśas – by stilling the mind through meditation (dhyana) (P.2.11) and pratiprasava (P.2.10) or “involution”, which steps through each of the eight limbs of yoga (the “aṣṭāṅga”), taking the mind beyond the senses and the ego into the deep stillness of samādhi. Pratyāhāra, often effectively practiced as śavāsana following āsana and then prānāyāma, is the first glimpse of pratiprasava, by withdrawing the senses and beginning to loosen the bond between manas and ahamkāra. So, any (so-called) “yoga” practices (or instructions) that stimulate sensory gratification of the ego work completely against pratiprasava.

Referring to the antahkāraṇa, it is the buddhi-mind that does viveka and vairāgya - the distinguishing, discerning, discriminating and deciding. Buddhi observes and discerns the relative illusion of “self” from the absolute Truth of “Self” (viveka), and then lets go (vairāgya) – to lift the veil of illusion. Buddhi uses discerning choice to intercept the monkey mind chatter of ahamkāra and its bond to manas and the senses. Loosening the grip of ahamkāra is difficult. Sharpening the buddhi is essential practice.

There are at least eight of Pātañjali’s sutras that explain consistently towards this point, for example:

- P.2.26. Ignorance (and consequent misidentification) is removed by unwavering discriminative knowledge (viveka) of the Seer (Puruṣa) and Nature (Prakṛti).
- P.4.25 – To one who sees the distinction between the mind and Ātman, thoughts of mind as Ātman cease forever.
- (see also P. 1.24, P.1.26, P.2.18, P.2.20, P.2.21, P.3.36)

The Bhagavad Gītā, 2.23-2.25 says: “The ‘Self’ (Ātman) cannot be pierced by weapons or burned by fire; water cannot wet it, nor can the wind dry it. The Self is everlasting and infinite, standing on the motionless foundations of eternity. The Self is unmanifested, beyond all thoughts, beyond all change. Knowing this, you should not grieve for the body (‘self’).”

The Bhagavad Gītā Ch.14.17 says “from sattva (buddhi) is born wisdom (jñāna), purity and happiness, from rajas greed, anger and pain, from tamas is confusion, delusion and ignorance.”

P.4.28. instructs that to remove deep-seated residues of experience (saṁskāras) that are the seeds from which the vṛtti arise (as ideas and thoughts – pratyaya), is in the same manner as described for the afflictions (kleśas) [see P.2.10 and P.2.11 – by viveka and dhyāna]. This is a considerably more difficult task.

If you become bothered or disturbed by daily tribulations then cultivating feelings (pratipakṣa bhāvanam) opposite to the negative thoughts that arise from citta reminds you of the abundance and love of your true inner nature (see P.2.4, 2.33 & 2.34). The texts identify four key sentiments - the “four immeasurables” or the “four abodes of Brahma” the brahmavihārās – loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity.

P.1.33 recommends - by cultivating feelings of loving kindness (maitrī) toward the happy (sukha), compassion (karuṇā) toward the unhappy (duḥkha), joy (mudita) toward the virtuous (puṇya), and equanimity (upekṣā) toward the wicked (apuṇya), the mind (citta) becomes purified and calm.

The practice of japa yoga uses sounds, including mantras to focus and shift the mind. Particular mantras used to lift the veil include:

Oṃ – Pranavah (Pātañjali P.1.27)

Viśokā vā jyotiṣmatī – (meditate upon the) ever-blissful Light within (Pātañjali P.1.36)

The Four Principle Mahāvākyaś, the “great utterances” (of Advaita Vedanta) – the essence of the “great letting go” paraviveka:

- Prajñānam brahma – Brahman is Consciousness (Aitareya Upaniṣad 3.1.3)
- Ayam ātmā brahma – The Self is Brahman (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.5)
- Tat Tvam Asi – That you are (You are Brahman) (Chandogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7)
- Aham brahmāsmi – I am Brahman (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.10)

So’ham – That am I (Īśa Upaniṣad) (often used in breathwork and prāṇāyāma – inhale so, exhale ham)

Hamsa – I am That (inversion of so’ham)

Neti, Neti – Not this, not this (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.3.6) – contrast with Brahman "The Truth of truth."

Satyasya Satyam – the Truth of truth (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.1.20)

The Gāyatrī mantra (Rgveda 3.62.10), is one of the most ancient invocations to the luminous quality of the Self, represented by the sun deity, Savitr (Sūrya). Its message is that as the darkness of night is removed by the light, of the sun so too might jñāna illuminate and dissolve avidyā.

Oṃ, bhūr bhuvah svah, tat savitur vareṇyaṃ, bhargo devasya dhīmahi, dhiyo yo naḥ prachodayāt

So, practicing sun salutations, a sūrya namaskāra sequence, especially first thing in the day, prefaced with the Gāyatrī mantra, can be another reminder of the luminous quality of the Self, represented by the rising sun. It also serves as a reminder for gratitude that you have been lucky to be born into this human form, and lucky to have survived the night, ready to live another day. Rather than treating it as a physical exercise warm-up, apply a deeper intention (sankalpa) of Īśvarapraṇidhānā, the fifth niyama, in the of reverence of the Ātman that you share with all living beings. Perform sūrya namaskāra with a sattva bhāva (sentiment) of deep gratitude.

Pātañjali has a particular bent towards the meditative practices of rāja yoga. P.1.33 to P.1.39 recommend a number of objects to focus on during meditation to help still the mind, including (P.1.39) “on anything which particularly appeals” (very handy!). Chapter 3, the vibhūti pāda, further recommends objects for saṁyama (the deepening succession of dhāraṇā and samādhi – to superconsciousness) - P.3.4 by mastery of saṁyama comes the light of jñāna. Much of chapter 3 offers a range of objects to focus on and their purported metaphysical results.

Even the more conventional and familiar aspects of contemporary haṭha yoga are recognised by Pātañjali. Through mastery of āsana, one is not disturbed by the dualities (P.2.48), and as the result of prāṇāyāma, the veil over the inner light (prakāśā avaraṇaṃ) is destroyed (P.2.48). So, hit the mat, and transform your practice – *with purpose!*

• Conclusion – Why does any of this matter?

Avidyā is a natural part of the human condition. Without it, there would be no need for yoga.

Understanding avidyā and its main consequences, rāga, dvesha, dukkha and samsara, and the buddhi-mind techniques of viveka and vairāgya, for discerning and letting go of passing thoughts and habits conditioned from past actions and experiences, is foundational to all forms of yoga.

With an awareness of the deeper purposes and structures underlying traditional, classical yoga, it’s possible to move one’s practice from bhogā into the more transformative states and perspectives of yoga. One’s thoughts, words and actions align with integrity, positively towards yourself and to others, to find a peaceful, loving satisfaction in daily life. And one becomes better able to deal with life’s regular ups and downs without becoming captured by the flow of memories and fantasies of the past or future.

The highest non-attachment - the paravairāgya - comes from the knowledge of the true Self (P.1.16).

ॐ TAT SAT – This is Truth, This is Reality

The Evolution of Prakṛti – The 25 Tattvas of Classical Sāṅkhya

