

Swamiji's 2026 New Year Message – Self-Knowledge (Ātma-vidyā)

Self-knowledge is the central subject matter of our scriptures, the Vedas. The Vedas are broadly divided into two parts. The initial portion deals with Dharma Śāstra—guidelines on how to live our lives in harmony with the world. The final portion, known as Vedānta, presents spiritual teachings primarily in the form of the Upaniṣads.

There are several Upaniṣads, most of them structured as dialogues between a teacher and a student. The Upaniṣadic students discerned the fundamental problem of humanity. This problem is martyatvam—mortality, or being subject to the principle of time. Because of time, everything is constantly changing. These changes bring both favorable and unfavorable conditions, and unfortunately, their nature is unpredictable and unknown. As a result, life often feels as though it is moving in darkness. We feel that we are not fully in control of ourselves or our future, which creates a constant sense of vulnerability. Anxiety and stress regarding the future of ourselves, our friends, and our family naturally follow. All these are consequences of change.

In the first part of life, we experience stress and anxiety. As life progresses, old age arrives along with various diseases, ultimately leading to death. These are the most explicit expressions of mortality. Over time, stress and anxiety intensify into fear and panic. Stress, anxiety, and fear are universal problems, all rooted in mortality. Another word for this condition is saṃsāra. Although we live with this problem daily, we rarely attempt to solve it. The students of the Upaniṣads recognized this problem clearly and sought a remedy.

The remedy discovered by the Upaniṣads is the recognition of the opposite of mortality–immortality. This immortal principle is called Ātma, and the knowledge of this truth is known as Ātma-vidyā. Ātma-vidyā enables us to face mortality without stress, fear, or panic. Many Upaniṣadic teachings are presented through dialogues between a teacher and a student to communicate this knowledge.

In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, there is a dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Maitreyi. Yājñavalkya informs Maitreyi of his decision to take sannyāsa and renounces all his material possessions. He asks his wife Maitreyi to share it with his other wife. Maitreyi, however, asks whether wealth can give immortality. Upon learning that it cannot, she chooses knowledge over possessions and asks for Ātma-vidyā.

In the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, Naciketā seeks this same knowledge from Yama Dharma Rāja. Yama tests Naciketā by offering wealth, pleasure, and even a kingdom. Naciketā rejects all these, recognizing that none of them can solve the problem of saṃsāra. Pleased with his discernment, Yama teaches him Ātma-vidyā.

Śāstra explains that we have both changing and unchanging aspects in our personality. Our personality is divided into four layers:

1. Outer layer – the visible sthūla śarīram (gross body)
2. Middle layer – the subtle, invisible inner personality
3. Karmic layer – the causal body (kāraṇa śarīram), which carries the results of past actions

These three layers are subject to arrival and departure. At the time of death, we shed the outer layer. At the time of pralaya, the total dissolution, even the subtle and causal

layers resolve.

Behind these changing layers lies the core, the Ātma. The three changing layers are called anātma, while Ātma is immortal and unchanging. Ātma is our true and higher nature. Through spiritual pursuit, we discover this truth and remain anchored in it. One who is firmly established in this knowledge is called a mukta puruṣa.

If I am anchored in immortality, I am no longer disturbed by change. Degeneration, disease, and death—the three “D’s”—belong only to the anātma. When we accept the mortality of the anātma while remaining established in the Ātma, the problem of saṁsāra is resolved. This freedom is called mokṣa, and it is open to everyone, not only to the elderly.

Let self-knowledge (Ātma-vidyā) be our primary goal and New Year resolution for 2026.