

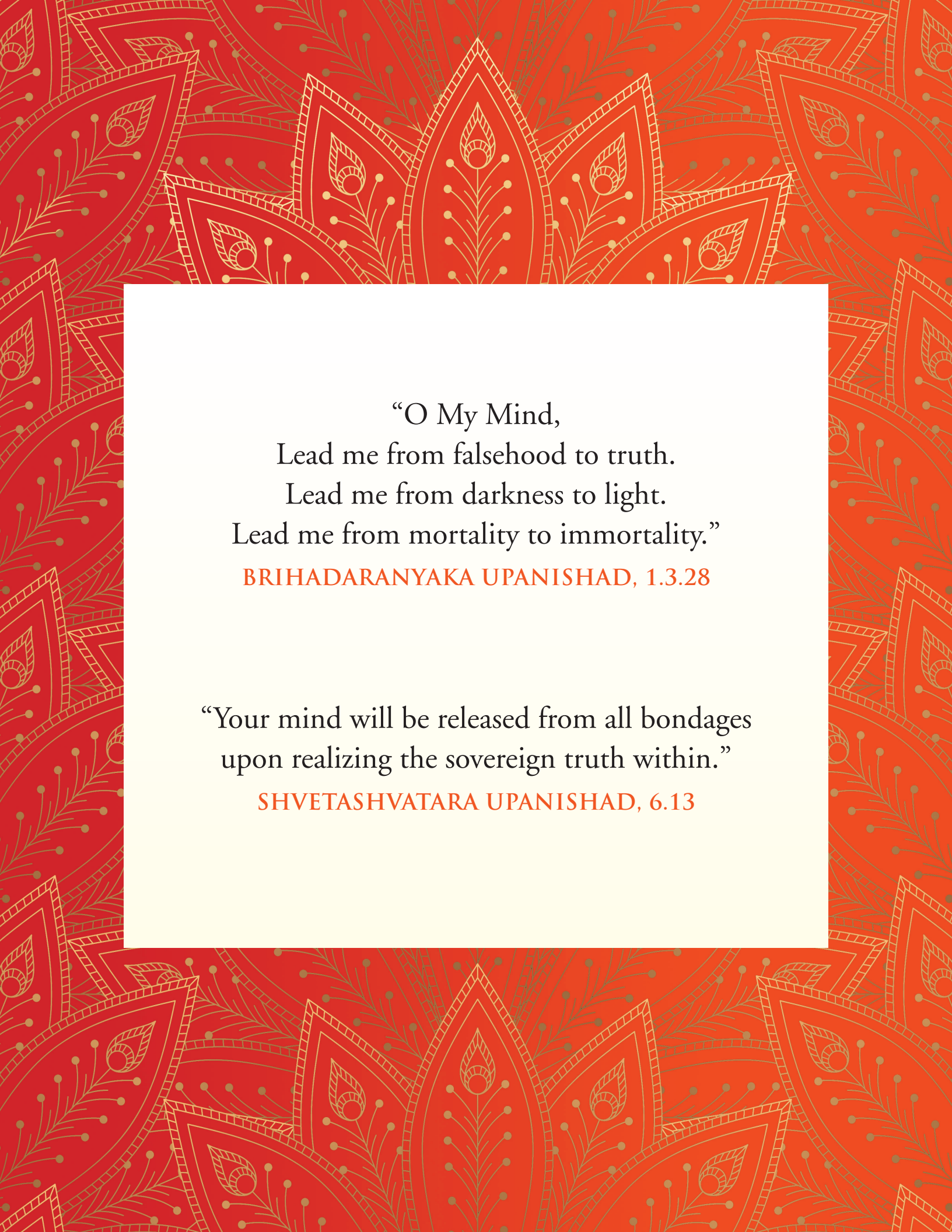


# SOVEREIGN SELF

Claim Your Inner Joy and Freedom  
with the Empowering Wisdom  
of the Vedas, Upanishads,  
and Bhagavad Gita

ACHARYA  
SHUNYA

BOOK EXCERPT



“O My Mind,  
Lead me from falsehood to truth.  
Lead me from darkness to light.  
Lead me from mortality to immortality.”

**BRIHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD, 1.3.28**

“Your mind will be released from all bondages  
upon realizing the sovereign truth within.”

**SHVETASHVATARA UPANISHAD, 6.13**

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# INTRODUCTION

## AN INVITATION TO THE SOVEREIGN SELF

We humans have accepted a shackled existence. Many of us feel our life is simply a jail sentence. We disappoint ourselves. We don't necessarily even like ourselves. We go about life imprisoned in our false beliefs, confirming our imagined personal limitations. We beg for freedom, recognition, and love from others, forgetting that our happiness, acceptance, and worth are up to us, that they are achieved through an inward journey toward the Self, never outward. We don't recognize the truth that we are the ruler of our own lives, in full command of our own experience.

Absolute authority over your inner world is your spiritual birthright. This book will give you the tools to reclaim a sovereign life.

No matter what set of limitations and restrictions you currently face, self-imposed or societally imposed, they will fall away. Your mind will become fearless, bold, and unassailable. You will begin leading a powerful and unbounded life from within. You will greet your same old life as if you were meeting it for the first time.

The enlightening wisdom contained herein will help unshackle your mind from any false or disempowering beliefs that are holding you back. You will begin to enjoy freedom from fear, freedom from wants, and freedom to reinvent yourself, rewrite your destiny, and lead your life the way you have always wanted to lead it. You will awaken to a secret spiritual dimension hidden inside of you: "Self" with a capital S. This Self is known as *Atman* in ancient Sanskrit, which means "the boundless one."

Once you begin living in the world not simply as a powerless individual but as Self, you will live in the same body and with the same relationships but no longer operate in the world from the same mind, with its attachments and

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numbing obligations to social roles. You may look the same outside, but you will experience a wholly different, boundless presence inside the same body.

When you begin to make choices from your inner freedom, you will no longer search the world and your relationships for crumbs of happiness. Something deeply powerful, abidingly abundant, forever free, and expansive inside you will begin to bless you from within. Then everything, even a tired, old life circumstance, will take on a new splendor as an opportunity to express your sovereignty.

### Bondage to Suffering Has Always Been Optional

My life was not always sovereign. For a while, my mind was plunged in the depths of darkness, devastated from sorrowful relationships, despairing from the sudden deaths of people I loved, and disheartened by the shocking curve balls that life can throw our way. Yet despite everything—even losing my sense of worth for a short time along the way—here I am. I feel the power, wholeness, and joy of being alive! These are not mere words. This is my visceral experience of my own self-worth after I regained the sovereignty to write my life script anew. I don't regret my learning curve, my mistakes in the past. I am proud to be mentally and spiritually sovereign today, and you can be too.

As you journey through this book, a beautiful, light-filled, powerful, and awakened state of mind, free of cravings and of fears, awaits you on the other side. You, too, can be the master of your destiny, just like the thousands of people I have helped awaken to sovereignty worldwide. You too can experience significant mental and spiritual autonomy. With the aid of the Vedas' timeless wisdom, you can play a role in shaping and awakening planetary consciousness. Take this opportunity to reexamine your assumptions about yourself and awaken to what lies within us all.

### The Gift of the Ancient Vedas

*Sovereign Self* embodies awakening teachings and practices from ancient, enlightened men and women of India, known as the Vedic seers. Their wisdom was preserved in a body of sacred literature known as the Vedas (*VAY-duhs*). These texts provide access to their original understanding of *advaita*, or “nondual consciousness”; yoga, the practices that enable a still mind; Ayurveda, the first

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holistic system of health and healing; and *moksha*, the path to self-actualization and self-realization through union with a transcendent state of pure being.

Hindus revere the Vedas, although the Vedas—which are more a way of conscious living and thinking than religion—precede Hinduism. All subsequent religions that emerged in India were influenced by the Vedas, to a larger or lesser degree. The Vedas attempt to seek answers to the age-old questions, “Who am I?” “Why do I suffer?” “What happens after death?” “Why am I never fulfilled?” “What am I made up of?” “What is the purpose of my life?” The Vedas dare to ask, “What intelligence existed before the big bang?” and “Who or what existed before the so-called creator existed?”

Once exclusively transmitted orally from a lofty master to a trusted disciple in Vedic spiritual lineages, the great wisdom of the Vedas can be found easily today, published as four big books called the *Rig-Veda*, *Sama-Veda*, *Yajur-Veda*, and finally the *Atharva-Veda*. They are rare among sacred texts in that they have contributions not only from male seers known as *rishis*, but from twenty-seven female seers known as *rishikas*, who have also contributed their channeled wisdom in the form of hymns and knowledge-packed verse. But the seers are only channels of a greater cosmic intelligence that is formless and nameless. The Vedas are called *apaurusheya*—having no human author, as such. This transcendental wisdom was simply revealed in the depths of the awakened consciousness of the rishis and rishikas, in meditation. Therefore, Vedas impart wisdom for the true being, never dogma.

Each book, or Veda, can be divided into two parts. The first part is known as the *Sambhita* section. It teaches *dharma*, or universal ethics, and reverence of nature and her forces, a sacred way of life aligned with universal laws and in celebration of a great universal intelligence. The second part of each of the Vedas, known as the *Upanishad* section, is of special significance. These 108 major and minor texts (in total) contain pure nondual wisdom—mystical teachings on the true Self beyond the mind and body. The Upanishads try to answer the question, “Who am I?” They show the way out of the magical show that is this universe through *jnana*, or “knowledge” yoga, leading to a final liberation or complete spiritual freedom from the wheel of birth and death, known as *moksha* or *mukti*.

The Upanishads define the Self, or *Atman*, as the innermost imperishable essence of all living beings, a consciousness that transcends the perishable personality. The Self is awareness itself, forever self-aware, sovereign, awake, unbounded.

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And when this Self expresses itself as consciousness underlying every particle of this universe, from a blade of grass to human soul, then it is called *Brahman*.

*“The Self of the individual [Atman] is identical to the Self of the universe [Brahman].”*

BRIHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD, 1.4.10

Self is not a theoretical concept alone, but the ultimate reality that the Upanishads advise each one of us realize. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, a famous Vedic seer gives his last teachings to his student, who happens to be his wife: “Self alone is worthy of seeing, hearing, contemplating, and realizing, because Self alone is the supreme Truth.”<sup>1</sup> This quest for the Self is the profound teaching of the Upanishads and the heart of this book.

The Bhagavad Gita is also an Upanishad—a later addition to the canon and perhaps the most popular one of them all. It contains the quintessence of all the remaining Upanishads. “Bhagavad Gita” literally translates into English as “Song of God.” It was spoken on a battlefield by the god Krishna, considered an incarnation of Supreme Reality, to Arjuna, a warrior confused in the midst of a war. In a metaphoric representation of life as a battle of conflicting choices, Krishna, the teacher, summarizes to Arjuna, the disciple, an entire gamut of Vedic teachings that ultimately lead Arjuna to realize the Self, in a mere seven hundred verses. These include the nondual wisdom (*Advaita Vedanta*), the many interconnected paths to yoga, and the timeless and universal Vedic principles of right values (*dharmā*), right action (*karmā*), and right knowledge (*jñānam*) that are so useful for a successful worldly and spiritual life. These wisdom lessons that transcend cultural boundaries address how to overcome existential suffering and offer a way to live life intelligently, heartfully, and gracefully to gain perfect self-knowledge and mastery of the Self. As a result, the Gita, as it is commonly called, is one of the most popular scriptures worldwide and has been widely translated and commentated on in almost every language of the world.

When I refer to “the Vedas” collectively, I am referring to this entire family of texts. Though will I elucidate many concepts from the first part of the Vedas in this book, I will rely more frequently on the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. I have put forth my own translation of the ancient verses, unless explicitly stated.

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The philosophical wisdom of the Vedas pervades not only Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism; their universal and timeless knowledge has influenced civilizations across the centuries. The Vedas are the foundation of both yoga and meditation—the most beautiful contributions of ancient India to humanity—and of Ayurveda, the world’s first truly holistic and comprehensive system of mind-body-soul health, now popular worldwide. They have made a lasting impression on influential historical figures, such as Gandhi, Rudolf Steiner, Carl Jung, Aldous Huxley, Huston Smith, Joseph Campbell, and Immanuel Kant.<sup>2</sup>

Henry David Thoreau wrote: “What extracts from the Vedas I have read fall on me the light of a higher and purer luminary . . . simpler and universal.”<sup>3</sup> Celebrated Indian poet and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore referred to the Upanishads as “an eternal source of light.”<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson noted most eloquently: “It was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence, which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the questions that exercise us.”<sup>5</sup> The Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger discussed the universal nature of knowledge and the universal nature of consciousness found in the Upanishads. He said: “There is no kind of framework within which we can find consciousness in the plural; insofar as any is available to us at all lies in the ancient wisdom of the Upanishad.”<sup>6</sup> His contemporary, Nobel Prize-winning Danish physicist Niels Bohr, said, “I go into the Upanishads to ask questions.”<sup>7</sup> And influenced by Schopenhauer, the German scholar Paul Deussen translated the Upanishads and said, “On the tree of wisdom there is no fairer flower than the Upanishads and no finer fruit than the Vedanta philosophy.”<sup>8</sup> Nuclear physicist Robert Oppenheimer learned Sanskrit to study the Bhagavad Gita and said, “The Vedas are the greatest privilege of this century.”<sup>9</sup>

We also find references to the ancient wisdom of the Vedas in the writings of modern thought leaders and teachers, including Ram Dass, Eckhart Tolle, Deepak Chopra, and Michael A. Singer.<sup>10</sup>

The test of the truth of the knowledge in the Vedas is that it must remain uncontradicted. That something is experienced, universally believed, or of tremendous practical utility does not necessarily mean that the knowledge is true. For example, we all experience sunrise and sunset. Nevertheless, this fact does not mean that the rising and setting of the sun is true knowledge since it is

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contradicted by astronomical knowledge. Valid knowledge in the Vedic tradition, known as *pramana*, is that which is not contradicted. I invite you to hold the teachings of the Vedas up to this standard.

What is the essence of this philosophy that has proven to be so perennial? In truth, explain the Vedas, we are not simply mortal bodies made up of perishable matter, but rather pure, infinite, immortal, nondual consciousness encased in mortal matter-suits. We are all always sovereign, free, eternally peaceful, and whole. We have simply forgotten our spiritual truth. An infinite mindset is important if we are to recognize who we really are, if we are to lead a truly joyful and expansive, fearless, and sorrow-free life.

Until we have awakening and liberating wisdom by our side, we remain identified with our worldly smallness. We keep looking for happiness, wholeness, and fulfillment outside of ourselves. This forgetfulness is the root cause of sorrow and psychological bondage. Self-discovery and self-realization must be humanity's priority, even amid the many daily roles we play. We must recognize that we remain infinite, even while living out our finite stories.

In this book, I will help you end this forgetfulness, remind you of your latent powers, and transmit, from my soul to yours, the teachings and practices that have delivered me from darkness to light, from bondage to freedom.

*I awakened to discover something beautiful inside me,  
and now you will too.*

## How to Read *Sovereign Self*

I suggest you read this book in sequence as the concepts and guided practices build on each other. Part I explores in detail the pathology of our delusion and how our mental patterns hypnotize us into believing we are disempowered and enslaved to the world. When we understand the net of ignorant delusion that binds us, we are ready to learn a strategy to break free and embody a more sovereign state of mind.

Part II offers a wealth of practices that activate an illumined state of mind, one that is more discerning, judicious, and inherently wise. You will learn how you can convert your mind into your friend on your journey, rather than a dictator,

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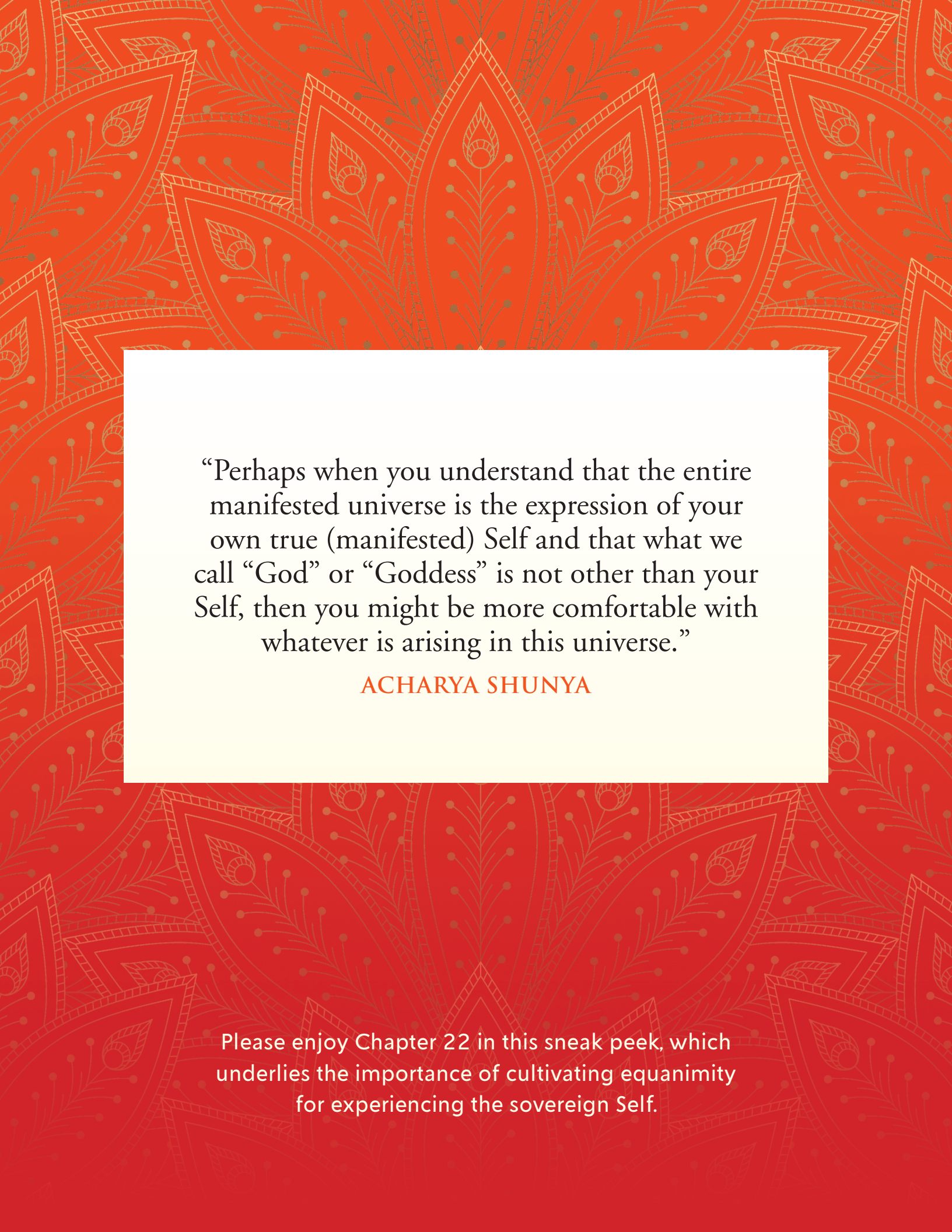
distractor, or detractor. You will learn to engage and be in this world as a worldly being in relationship with others, with greater psychological self-determination and emotional coherence.

Part III reveals a code of universal ethics that empowers you to act in the world with the full power of evolved spiritual awareness. As you “pull yourself together” in this way, you develop the clarity and wisdom to set life goals that acknowledge your essential nature. Embodying your sacred purpose prepares you for awakening—the achievement of the sovereign Self—and a life of bold authenticity, abiding joy, and inner freedom.

As you encounter the original ancient verses of the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, try reading them out aloud. They are loaded with rich meaning and subtle symbolism. I suggest that you take notes, journal, or sketch as you go. Resist the urge to compare these teachings to any prior knowledge you may have encountered. Let them work on you. The more slowly you go and the more you contemplate what you have read, the more quickly your mind will decondition from its current state of bondage and open to true wisdom.

Your mind is very intelligent. It simply needs a few keys to unlock its thought padlocks. Even while holding jobs, paying bills, raising children—even with no time to meditate, chant, or sign up for a yoga class—if you contemplate these teachings in the privacy of your own mind, you will remember who you really are.

Under all the hurt, betrayal, anger, hatred, insanity, powerlessness, disillusionment, and sorrow of this worldly life, you are pure possibility. Know how infinitely whole, powerful, joyful, and ultimately free you are beyond your struggling personality. I invite you to meet your sovereign Self.



“Perhaps when you understand that the entire manifested universe is the expression of your own true (manifested) Self and that what we call “God” or “Goddess” is not other than your Self, then you might be more comfortable with whatever is arising in this universe.”

ACHARYA SHUNYA

Please enjoy Chapter 22 in this sneak peek, which underlies the importance of cultivating equanimity for experiencing the sovereign Self.



## Samatvam: Cultivating Equanimity by Accepting What Is Arising

*“Water flows continuously into the ocean, but the ocean is never disturbed:  
in the same manner, desire is continuously flowing into the mind of the seer,  
But the seer’s Self is not disturbed.”*

BHAGAVAD GITA, 2.70

Once, a king revered a yogi who lived in the forest just outside the kingdom. Every day the yogi came to the palace after dawn and gave his student, the king, a wild fruit, such as a fig or an apple. The king politely accepted the fruit, but given he had a royal feast waiting for him, he never ate it. In deference to the yogi, he did not throw out the fruit but stored it a special room—all of it accumulated there over the years, rotting.

One day, a monkey got hold of one of the pieces of fruit and eagerly ripped it apart. Out fell a shining diamond onto the floor.

The king was shocked. It became clear that he had rejected the yogi’s gift, thinking it was a mere wild fruit, but all along, there was a diamond hidden in each fruit. How generous of the yogi! He ran to the yogi’s abode and begged his forgiveness.

The yogi said with kind eyes, “But all human beings do the same thing. In every experience, a gem is hidden for you, a gift from the Supreme Reality, but you don’t wait to find it.”

Every experience of your Self is a gift from the universe. How can it be anything but a gift? But you only see the outer “wild” form and miss the message hidden inside the experience!

That is right: divorce, childbirth, the death of a loved one, and even betrayal, humiliation, and terminal disease are wild fruits with hidden gems.

But we refuse to read the message. We can't be bothered with the wild fruit—we only want the exotic, pretty ones. We have our artillery of likes and dislikes ready to reject these fruits that we did not order. This sense of “control” that our ego entertains is a delusion. Ultimately, you must wake up and eat the fruit that came to you by divine orchestration. This is the path to total equanimity.

## The Connection Between Equanimity and Dharma

The Sanskrit word for emotional equanimity, or inner tranquility, is *samatvam*. Believe it or not, it is a choice. Choosing tranquility means consciously choosing to operate from dharma, in all kinds of human encounters. It means wanting to become more spiritually awake, rather than simply reacting and acting mechanically from knee-jerk thoughts and feelings arising in a cluttered mind. By cultivating an attitude of friendship toward those who are happy, compassion toward those in distress, joy toward those who are dharmic, and detachment toward those who are nonvirtuous, equanimity and tranquility arise in the mind.

Therefore, inner equanimity is a key value on which rest all other values, like truthfulness, humbleness, and compassion. After all, only a tranquil mind (one reposing in the knowledge of the Self always) chooses dharma. An immature, reactive, impulsive mind that is acting out, numb, or hell-bent on having a tantrum can hardly uphold dharma, can it?

This is important because without tranquility, which represents sattva, the illumined quality, in the mind, we can use none of our tools when we are faced with difficulties. Our mind gets taken over by the suffering mind, comprised of agitating rajas, dulling tamas, and delusory attachments! We get trapped in our own overactive imagination that is not anchored in reality.

When the mind is disturbed, we also lose the power to discern and detach wisely. Then, all our decisions go wrong. We lose the capacity to learn from our

experiences because we are reacting, even hyperventilating in a full-on suffering-samsara mode. Samsara spells pure powerlessness.

## God, Self, and the Universe Are Expressions of One Indivisible Consciousness

Perhaps when you understand that the entire manifested universe is the expression of your own true (manifested) Self and that what we call “God” or “Goddess” is none other than your Self, then you might be more comfortable with whatever is arising in this universe.

The Bhagavad Gita makes this observation: “That person who venerates Higher Power, with the knowledge that this Supreme Power is situated in all living beings (as Self), abides in Divine Consciousness in all circumstances.”<sup>1</sup>

When you understand this amazing truth, then whatever you encounter in this creation becomes meaningful—no thing or occurrence is random. Thanks to this understanding of God, not as a special person with miraculous powers or a super-being living in the clouds (accessible only after death and only if we are good) or high up in some mountains, but as a super-intelligent, all-pervading principle or presence, then we can greet God everywhere.

You don’t need to die and go to heaven to “meet God.” You can meet God every day, everywhere, in every eye because this universe is an expression of the same omniscient presence. And why go far? You can greet the same omnipotent presence at work and in your own heart, and in fact, reposing as your dazzling and divine Self!

I appreciate the endless opportunities to experience divinity as an all-pervading intelligent presence with every sunrise and every sunset. Thanks to this beautiful, divinity-suffused vision the seers from the mystical Upanishads have shown me, even the inanimate rivers and mountains feel sacred, every pebble suffused with the light of the Divine Self. The Vedas reverberate with this holy vision that encompasses wholeness: “O Divine Presence, you are in the tender grass on the seashore, as well as in the foaming waves. You are on the sand banks as well as in the midst of the current. You are in the little pebbles as well as in the expanse of the ocean. You are in the lonely places as well as to be found in the crowded places . . . salutations to thee.”<sup>2</sup>

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Once you begin to appreciate this entire universe as the theater in which the divine truth is emerging everywhere, visibly and invisibly, in the living and through the nonliving, then you will find divinity radiating in every eye, both the good-hearted ones and dark-hearted ones. Both the sorrow-imparting life challenges and joy-giving circumstances will unpack for you the same essence of the one universal truth of divine, transcendent consciousness.

## Equanimity in the Face of Sorrow

*“For one who has mastered their mind, and who is tranquil, the supreme Self is self-evident. [The knower of Self] remains the same in heat and cold, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, as well as in honor and infamy.”*

BHAGAVAD GITA, 6.7

If not even a speck of dust or a blade of grass is out of place or unnecessary, then how can a sorrowful circumstance, no matter how dire, be frivolous or purposeless?

Each difficult situation is an integral part of an elaborately intelligent cosmos representative of our Universal Self, or God, with meaning and intentionality. It may be that the message or purpose is hidden in the sorrow. Whether we recognize this purpose or reason now or later, without a doubt, every difficult situation is meaningful and purposeful.

There are too many factors, including shared human consciousness and its collective ignorance (maya), that make circumstances outside the area of our influence unpredictable and outside our control. Whatever is meant to happen happens according to a greater cosmic will. We often distract ourselves by nursing our likes and attachments in our samsara and then rant, rave, and fall apart when things don't go our way. We create mindless futuristic sorrow by resisting, making the sorrow “go away” or manipulating things to make them go “our way.”

Whether we experience the inevitable in a mature way, versus in a childish way (protesting and screaming), or in a numbed way (medicating or distracting ourselves), we have no true out except through enlightened knowledge. We must wake up and recognize that nothing is random and that perhaps this bitter

sorrow, loss, betrayal, disease, or loneliness is exactly what our ego needs on our path to awakening to its highest potential.

Wisdom lies in controlling what you can control, which is your response to the situation, not the situation itself. Wisdom means trusting a greater intelligence beyond your ego's arithmetic of what it wants and does not want and aligning your will with cosmic will.

You are a boundless being—you are more powerful than you know, even if your ego has forgotten it temporarily. Deep down, you have the intellectual strength to overcome, transform, or peacefully accept any situation or challenge, no matter how painful.

Baba once said,



*“If pain has come to you in a divine universe, then you, the divine one, have what it takes to face and grow from it.”*



If you're in the center of a difficulty, then you're in the center of the resolution also. You alone can find that solution by exposing your mind to enlightened wisdom.

Reality does not create stress, pain, or frustration. Your perception and interpretation of reality does. Not accepting reality is exhausting.

This is not to say that you should not act to improve a situation or protect yourself from harm. As a teacher, I never advocate fatalism or becoming a doormat to abusive or difficult people or circumstances, meekly accepting good or bad. But I do ask my students to spiritually grow up, be realistic about their expectations, and refrain from unhealthy grief, rage, and shame every time an unwanted situation or circumstance raises its unpleasant head.

Perhaps my own story will help illustrate this.

## My Inner Guru Has a Stiff Neck!

Some years ago, an inflammatory genetic condition was activated after a nasty accident. As a result, my neck no longer moves with ease. It is almost immobile now. I must move my entire body to address people on either side of me. In the

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past, I was in excruciating physical pain, and I could not even type an email, let alone an entire manuscript (as I did for this and my former book). Thankfully, my practice of Ayurveda and yoga took away the pain, but the stiffness persists.

Given that I am a public speaker, this could be potentially embarrassing, but this situation became an opportunity to explore some questions: “What truly matters?” and “Who am I, if I am not my ‘perfect’ outward body?” This neck situation brought me new depths of empathy for people with disabilities, physical challenges, scars, disfigurement, social rejection, and trauma. Others may gape at us as if we are an anomaly when we are simply Self in a different body-suit.

By applying a greater wisdom, my so-called physical challenge or disfigurement has revealed to me the beauty of my soul. It has ultimately given more than it’s taken from me. I have imbibed lessons in cultivating tranquility, deepest self-acceptance, and unshakeable equanimity that I would never have known and “lived” at this deeply vulnerable level.

Today, I teach worldwide with my neck as it is. I am unstoppable. Without enlightened wisdom of my true Self and a divine order, without the practice of equanimity, I would have simply curled up in sorrow and retired from the public life forever, feeling like a personal failure (when it comes to health) and crushed and cursed by “God.”

I am confident now that every difficulty has a hidden blessing. The blessing is that I will emerge tranquil, steadfast, and more sovereign than before. And in this inner equanimity, slowly, my neck will heal too, even if it takes more time than usual.

## Finding the Inner Monk in Karmic Solitude

“I am people-less,” was another favorite sad lament in my life, once upon a time.

Repeatedly, I would find myself physically alone, either through deaths of my loved ones or through sheer lack of opportunity to connect with like-minded people (besides my students, who are not peers) at an intellectual or heartfelt level. My husband has long work hours, and also, in the early years of our relationship, we could not really connect. Even now, while we are beautifully harmonious together, we are not great talkers. Our son works abroad. The rare times I would encounter a potential friend with whom I could really have a conversation, they moved away, and some have died.

I used to wonder, *Am I socially unlucky?* The loneliness made me sad. But today, I can tell you, I am not sad, nor am I lonely. That sorrow was the perception of my attached samsara causing yet more grief. But this suffering only exists in our individual minds. We can magnify it to any extent we want. Accepting the reality, as in a flat resignation, is not the goal either. On the contrary, once we inquire and gain clarity on the hidden good in the so-called sorrow, we become better equipped, despite the sorrow, to make decisions that work for us.

Upon reflection I discovered that a supremely intelligent universe has provided me with the perfect external setup to discover my inner monk within a householder situation. I had all the freedom to mindfully cultivate solitude to self-explore, meditate, contemplate, write, reflect, embrace inner silence, and become who I am today. The Supreme Intelligence was saying to me through huge billboards: “Got solitude? Got quietude? Got self-reflection?” My specific and somewhat sparse social situation in this lifetime has helped me befriend my inner goddess.

Now, when I meet with the many people that my role as a spiritual preceptor demands, I come from an inner fullness. I am happy when we interact, and I am happy when I am alone. Students crowd me for my attention, and I can gift them the inner powers that I have cultivated in my alone time. And when I am alone—time I actively seek and protect now—I enter a mystical realm, whose doors open with my acceptance of my life situation as is and finding fullness in what looks like emptiness.

Today, I am a friend to the world. A Divine Intelligence that accompanies my true Self saw to that. I cooperated with my faith in a divine evolution. Nothing is ever random, and what looks like punishment is just the outer covering of a hidden, shining gem! The road God wants us to travel may not be our preferred road. Yet, our ease and flow may lie there, on that road less traveled.

## Only Radical Acceptance of What Is Leads to Emotional Equanimity

The spiritual practice of cultivating emotional tranquility includes *acceptance of what is* in your day-to-day life. Acceptance nips the bloom of the suffering mind in the bud. Agitation (rajas) and stuckness (tamas) don't arise as much or are quickly arrested. Peacefulness, clarity, balance, and joy (sattva) become steadfast.

### *Sovereign Self*

Your mind will become purer, calmer, more accepting, flowing, trusting, happier, relaxed, and cheerful, radiating a more spiritually aligned state overall.

Let me share my student's observations in this regard:

*"I went for an interview recently, and I was very nervous to the point that I felt my brain freeze up. I had to give a fifty-minute lecture, and I couldn't even get myself to practice once! This lecture was in front of professors whom I held in very high regard, and I felt paralyzed because I was convinced they would think I was a fool as soon as I opened my mouth. I wanted to run away. But I decided in that moment to test my dharma. I decided to forgive myself for not having practiced. I also realized that I no longer wished to be bound by my (false) myth-esteem, which was holding my mind captive (to somehow earn the approval of these professors). If they think I am incompetent, so be it! My true Self is beyond rejection.*

*So, I said to myself, 'I am here, and I am going to do my best. If I fail, I will fail gloriously!' I could have run away or feigned an illness, but I couldn't get myself to do that. I realized I had to face this situation, honor my commitment, do the best I could, and let my connection to my inner truth lead me. The beauty of the whole process was that once I started upholding dharma, even this outwardly apparent disaster played out beautifully. I was able to witness dharma in action. I spoke my calm truth, so all my answers felt perfect. While moments ago I was experiencing a flurry of emotions—shame, anger, guilt, and inadequacy—the moment I connected with my inner Self, which is beyond outer approval or disapproval, I was able to be an observer, a sakshi. As a witness, I could observe these emotions as unnecessary, rather than being caught up in them. Being grounded in dharma, I was steady as a rock. My dharma spine was strengthened because I was able to transcend this samsara storm and remain steady in my inner tranquility."*

The Bhagavad Gita talks about the greed of wanting life situations to go exactly as we want, known as *spraha*. We humans, alone among animals, have this existential greed—the greed for existence to give us the cookies we want, when we want them, and as much as we want! Once we've enjoyed cookies of happiness, success, approval, or admiration, we become cookie addicts. We want more and more.

But is that even a realistic attitude, given we live in a duality-filled world marked by impermanence, and every experience is always cut short by its exact opposite?

*Look how this universe teaches you what to expect from it during your human voyage. The day is always followed by night, light by darkness, spring by winter, youth by aging, birth by death, and death by birth. In the same way, a greater cosmic intelligence sends happiness and sorrow to visit you. Just as you don't go into confrontation mode when it rains or the sun shines, nor do you try to control the weather. Let the rain of sorrow too fall upon your being. When you become wet in it, that alone will lead you to find the open sky within your heart.*

Indeed, our equanimity lies in greeting this cloudburst, not entreating it to leave or running away from it.

### This Wave Too Shall Pass If You Simply Observe

Can you let the volatile waves in the ocean of existence rise and fall? The ocean always washes ashore pairs of opposites: fame and anonymity, victory and defeat, loss and gain, likable and unlikable, comfortable and uncomfortable, beautiful and ugly, acceptance and rejection—each a teaching of sorrow and joy. Instead of trying to control the opposites to make them vanish or to get more of them, can you be like a lighthouse rising above the crashing waves of duality, steadfast, unmoved, and unshakable?

This, too, is another wave . . . it, too, shall pass.

Give the wanted and unwanted circumstances only so much importance, and remain steadfast in remembrance of a higher spiritual truth, accepting all the opposites with a cultivated spiritual practice of willingness and acceptance.

### How to Practice Acceptance and Willingness

The seven-step cycle below can help you identify, understand, and step out of repetitive cycles of resistance when faced with an unwanted circumstance and bring in greater acceptance and willingness.

Our first attitudinal response to unwanted situations and outcomes is generally inner resistance. We simply don't want to face difficult situations, and we go into a "why me" mode. So, we must confront two issues simultaneously.

## *Sovereign Self*

One is the outer difficult situation. The other is the inner emotional resistance. We spend all our energy questioning the emergence of challenges (resistance); wallowing in rajas-emotions of blame, resentment, and rage; and resisting tamas-emotions of self-pity, sorrow, and shame.

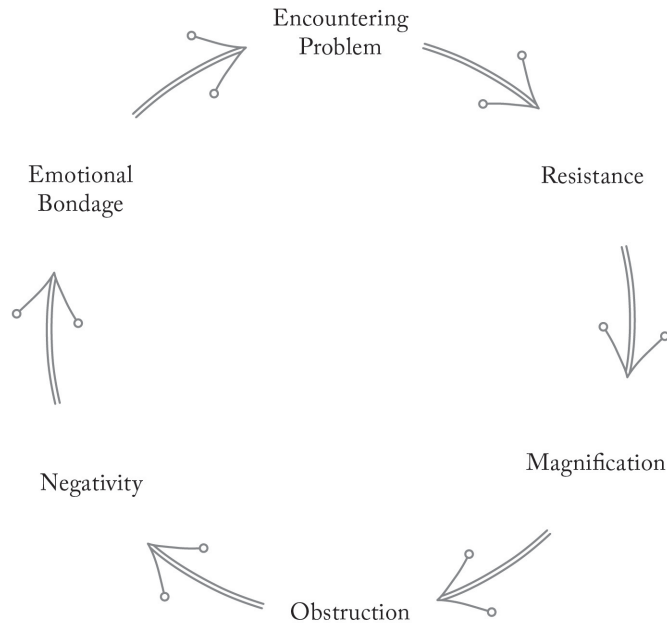


Figure 22.1: The Seven-Step Willingness-and-Acceptance Cycle

Resistance leads to inner magnification. We lose perspective, and things appear bigger, nastier, or grimmer than they may be, and perceived consequences are magnified in our mind. Emotionally overcome with likes and dislikes, attachments, and aversions pertaining to the problem, our rational thinking is concealed. None of it is real. It is all imagined.

## Problem-Solving Skills Meet Obstruction

Magnification of negative gloom-and-doom-type emotions obstruct your intellect's natural problem-solving skills. The higher mind cannot use its own intelligence, skills, and past experiences or recall what it has read or admired in others regarding handling difficult situations. It cannot access its own creativity,

ingenuity, or, least of all, acceptance or any thought of God or Self. It is simply overcome by the tidal wave of despair and frustration. Negativity takes over your daily life.

Watch out for complete emotional negativity in the form of hopelessness. We feel joyless, despondent, and depressed. We are terrified, stressed, and anxious. We see ourselves as victims of God, fate, humanity, and bad relationships, and we still never pause to inquire if our state of mind has anything remotely to do with our unchecked negativity.

### Bondage: Loss of Emotional Sovereignty

Sustained emotional stress or psychological negativity leads to maladaptive behavior and hides the hidden gem of wisdom that may await you in your acceptance of the situation, no matter how grim it may be. We get caught up in pathological greed (for things to be or go exactly how we want them to go). Then, not being able to fill our cosmic holes with our cosmic greed, we experience uncontrollable grief, gut-wrenching fear of future problems, and finally anger. Any soul insights coming our way naturally are drowned in the deluge of negative delusory emotions that now besiege our mind. We are doomed to experience nonstop emotional pain of our own creation just because we could not accept . . . what had come our way.

Oftentimes, we lose our energy, money, and peace of mind in the process. We are simply projecting our undigested emotions all over the planet, not accepting the difficulty we face as an opportunity for inner growth.

Pausing to discern between what is real and what is simply projected reality is like switching on a lone bulb in the dark of night. Redemption can only come when we discern how our mind has become a prisoner of its own resistances. Then we can detach the emotional slugs and debug our samsara. Only then can we choose to cultivate acceptance and willingness over default resistance.

Every problem has a solution. When hunger is the problem, you must eat food. When isolation is the problem, you must make friends. When resistance is the problem, you must cultivate willingness and acceptance through exercise of viveka. Wisdom lies in controlling what we can control, which is our *response* to the experience or situation and not the situation itself.

### *Sovereign Self*

Whenever I am faced with choiceless sorrow in my life, I have trained myself to breathe deeply every time I feel the urgency to fix things, push them away in resistance, or drown in emotional negativity.

I deliberately slow down by embracing quietude and a meditative-contemplative mode. I ask myself: *What am I being asked to see in this great sorrow that has colored my being with emotional pain? Let me wait to receive the answer within my heart from my Self seated within.*

This is the practice of willingness that follows acceptance—the willingness to have revealed in due time in our own heart, what we must see. This revelation of a deeper insight occurs not through our compulsive and angst-ridden egoic math of “It must be this way,” or “It must be that way.” It is a deeper insight that arises in the form of pure emotions that accompany insights and clarity when we become relatively still inside with practiced acceptance and willingness with greater spiritual poise.

The decision to not simply act and react from knee-jerk feelings and impulses in the lower mind but to simply observe the situation pulls us into a more transcendent (nondual) state of awareness.

The observing deactivates or weakens the hasty impulses. We become less emotionally reactive; we have purview of greater self-knowledge from within, as the higher mind is activated.

When we practice acceptance and willingness using our discriminatory faculty, despite problems that may feel urgent, the delusory thoughts and negative feelings subside or recede into the background and our greater soul-knowingness arises into the foreground

Any time you deliberately step back to observe your “reactive mind-field,” it can no longer exercise the same kind of power over you. Only as a neutral observer of your own mind, can you dissolve the illicit edifice of your own resistances, fueled by irrational attachments and aversions, leaving you free to respond emotionally in a more brilliant, creative, and original manner.

Therefore, we must expand our own understanding; we must wake up and recognize that nothing is random, not even the so-called unwanted life situations, and that perhaps this bitter experience (loss, betrayal, disease, loneliness, or similar) is exactly what our ego needs on our path to awakening to its potential. This recognition will make you inwardly tranquil.

Next time this happens, you can kick the resistance cycle by simply facing the unfortunate circumstance and roaring with all your sovereign power. Tell yourself repeatedly, “If I have a problem, I will find the answer too.”

## Be a Peaceful Warrior in the Battle Grounds of Life

The holiest Vedic scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita, was delivered on a battleground, when the war was about to begin. The teacher, Krishna, wanted his student, Arjuna, to go to war against an enemy of society and sanity, neither as a victim nor as an aggressor, but as a divine being, as Self. He wanted his student’s passion to be accompanied by inner equanimity, his mind in his full command.

Here is how the Krishna defines mental equanimity to Arjuna: “Having made pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat the same (samatvam), engage in battle [of your life] for the sake of the battle; you shall not incur sin.”<sup>3</sup>

The background of a battle is an appropriate allegory, reminding us not to hesitate before the battlegrounds we face in our life. Today we are more familiar with relationship battlegrounds, far-removed from the dust of hoofs and the beat of shod feet.

Our relationship battles may be in corporate meeting rooms, in the stock exchanges of the world, in the hallways of Capitol Hill, in congresses and parliaments, in towns small and large, or in national or global courts of justice that we humans have instituted for conducting our relational, egoic battles. Indeed, our life bristles with professional, political, and personal relationship battles.

That is why it is essential to cultivate equanimity, making ourselves tranquil warriors for the battles we regular folks face every day at work, at home, and on our commute. Are you ready for the battle for inner equanimity? That is the emblematic question. Not taking a side is not an option, since diffidence is akin to acting, albeit passive action. The Bhagavad Gita has compared human existence to a great battle of ideas (*dharmayuddha*) that begins from the first movement of conception, where sperms battle for supremacy, onward. No wonder Krishna says: “Filled with egoism, if you think, *I will not fight*, vain is this your resolve [for] nature will compel you [to fight for your existence].”<sup>4</sup>

The laboratory of spiritual growth is life itself, where battles may be fought outside you, but with a contemplative, discriminant, and detached mind within

you, you can be a peaceful warrior. For the battles of life, more important than a temple, a church, or a mosque is a tranquil mind trained to remain inwardly empowered by the Self.

That is why the Bhagavad Gita says: “Therefore, always, remember the Self, and fight [your daily battles] with mind and intellect fixed or absorbed in Self; you shall doubtless come back to Self alone.”<sup>5</sup>

All our life experiences, even the sorrowful ones, can teach us something. But without tranquility, we cannot see what we must see. Only by valuing inner equanimity can you learn to face the transient sorrows and joys coming at you with some cultivated neutrality. Birth, death, youth, old age, hope, and disappointment are coming your way. Are you ready to face the opposites? If you value tranquility and want to make it your prime inner value or guidance system, you must go beyond the word and understand my invitation to live with emotional maturity. By valuing tranquility, you will transcend your own ego and implement the practices I impart in this book.

## Equanimity Is Your Best Aid in Relationship Struggles

When a pond is cloudy, we cannot see what lies on its bed. But when the water is tranquil, the mud settles down, and we can see all the way to the rocky bottom. Just like that, when our mind becomes tranquil, we can see all our samsara and take stock of our every feeling and thought.

The Bhagavad Gita says: “In tranquility, the destruction of all miseries takes place. Verily, the self-knowledge of this serene-minded [person] becomes firm.”<sup>6</sup>

But, if we don't value cultivating equanimity, even a minor challenge inside a relationship or an old painful memory resurfacing will be enough to set us off in another samsara-suffering storm! The mind is then easy prey to an unending litany of self-created sorrow. Old traumas become fresh traumas every living moment.

Therefore, the only solution is to process pain on two planes at once: you must inquire into the pain by fully being with it (no bypassing) and be in the state of practiced equanimity at the same time. You will feel the full depth and fierce intensity of the pain (or memory), and at the same time, you will transcend it by being able to observe it, from an autosuggested and consciously chosen tranquil state of mind.

For most of us, the mind is an expanse of victimhood where somebody or other—spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend, other woman, other man, mother-in-law, great-aunt, mom, dad, step-mom, step-dad—is out to get us. If it is not a person or group of persons that we know intimately, then the seasons, planets, government, politicians, terrorists, weather, and aliens can do the job.

The victim script is a tamasic state of mind. “Tamas” literally means “darkness,” and it represents a state of mind that is thoroughly drenched in self-forgetfulness (blind to the inner light).

Here, we “believe” we are cosmically disempowered. The world or even God or destiny or the higher principle (whatever be the name) wants us to remain so, and we have no right to choose otherwise. Negativity, disappointments, suspicion, and self-doubt are permanent residents of our mind, coloring our everyday self-experience as deeply impotent. We expect failure in all areas of our life: professional, personal, health, and of course, relationships!

Our true Self, which is neither a victim nor an aggressor but always powerfully tranquil, is right here within us; however, under the influence of maya, we fail to see or acknowledge its existence and instead hold steadfast to our version of the story. As long as we keep swinging between victim and aggressor consciousness, we are unable to transcend either. We will keep slipping into one or the other mode of consciousness again and again. Sometimes, our entire life is spent in the clutches of maya, and even on our death bed, we die as the angry unrepentant aggressor, or we die of the unredeemed victim’s grief.

When we consciously accept all parts of ourselves, darkness as well as light, we begin to experience a new raw soul-power to simply be ourselves and let others be themselves—to live and let live—by neither becoming a power monger (rajas) nor victim (tamas), shaped and morphed by another person’s power. We become someone willing to authentically uphold our sovereignty through spiritually available inner knowledge, practices, and disciplines that make us equanimous (sattva). Can sorrow exist forever without pulling in its opposite, joy? Can powerlessness rule your mind for long, when radical freedom is your real nature? In radical wholeness, which is Self, can darkness exist long, without pulling in light?

*“The one whose wisdom is steadfast is sovereign;*

*This one knows bliss in the Atman and wants nothing else.*

*Sovereign Self*

*Residual desires may cross the heart,  
But the awakened one renounces these vasanas too, through wisdom.  
I call such a person sovereign.”*

BHAGAVAD GITA, 2.55

*“Not shaken by adversity; nor yearning after happiness:  
Free from fear, free from anger; free from the attachments risen to desire,  
Such a person is sovereign.”*

BHAGAVAD GITA, 2.56

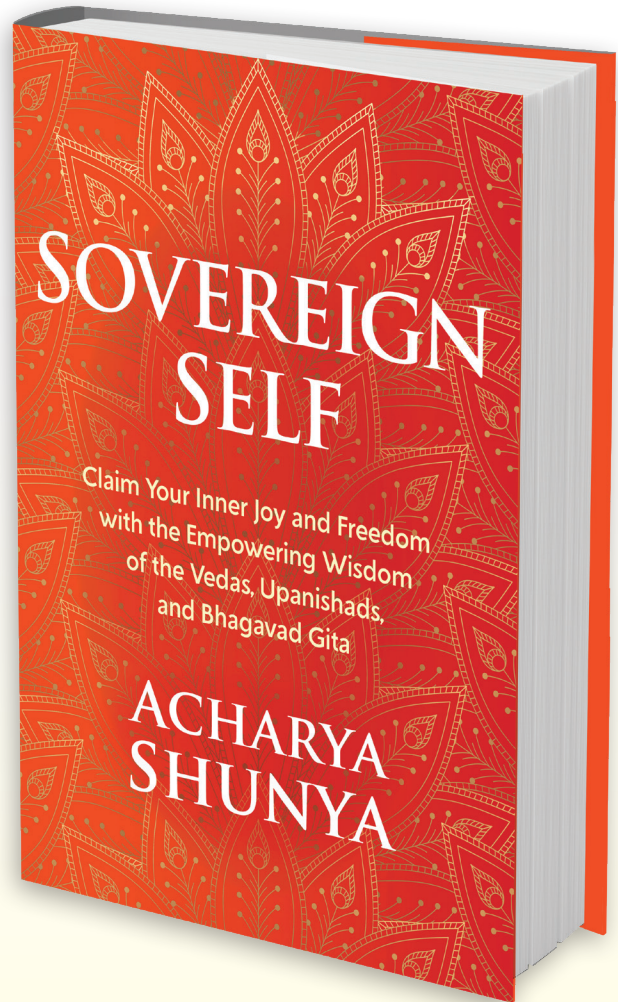
*“The one who is not limited by body consciousness  
May be lucky and does not rejoice; may be unlucky and does not lament  
Such a person is sovereign.”*

BHAGAVAD GITA, 2.57



## ACHARYA SHUNYA

is an award-winning and internationally renowned spiritual teacher and scholar of Advaita (nondual wisdom) and a classically-trained master of Yoga and Ayurveda. The first female head of her 2,000-year-old Indian spiritual lineage, she has dedicated her life to the dissemination of Vedic knowledge for the spiritual uplifting of all beings. She is the founder of the spiritual and educational nonprofit Vedika Global and author of *Ayurveda Lifestyle Wisdom*.



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