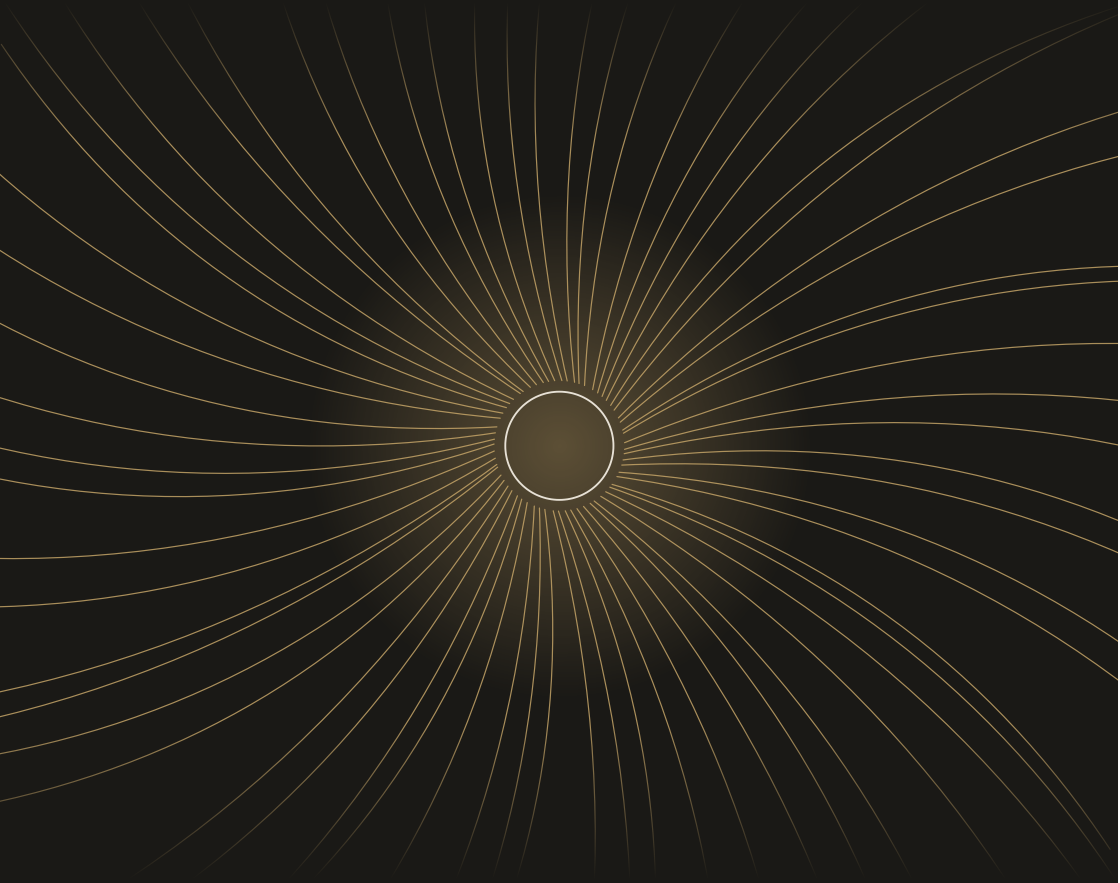
METANOIA

Journal of Unitive Knowledge



Beginnings

VOLUME I · ISSUE I · NOVEMBER 2026

Review draft. Not for circulation until approved by the editors.

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Metanoia, Journal of Unitive Knowledge. Volume I, Issue 1, 6 November 2026.

Metanoia is published by the Unitive Knowledge Society. It is free to read online and free to download: unitiveknowledge.com/metanoia/volume-1/issue-1

Each piece marks what kind of statement it makes: Historical, Primary text, Scholarship, or Metanoia's interpretation. Translations of Greek and Sanskrit phrases are the editors' own unless a translator is named.

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Volume I, Issue 1

From the Editors

The first issue asks what unitive knowledge is, and reads the Chāndogya Upaniṣad alongside Plotinus.

A journal needs a reason to exist, and ours is a question rather than a conviction. Across three thousand years and many languages, contemplatives have described a kind of knowing that does not stand at a distance from what it knows. They call it union, realization, vision, gnosis, awakening. Metanoia exists to ask what that knowledge is, whether the many descriptions of it describe one thing, and what difference it makes to a human life.

The name of the journal is a Greek word for a change of mind. In the New Testament it is usually translated as repentance, but its older sense is broader: a turning of the whole understanding, after which one sees differently. That is the kind of change the traditions we study claim to bring about, and it is the kind of attention we hope these pages can reward.

This first issue begins at the beginning. Our opening essay sets out what we mean by unitive knowledge and, just as important, what we do not mean. A study of Plotinus and Śaṅkara then sets two of the most rigorous accounts of the ultimate side by side, and asks whether their resemblance survives a close reading. It does, we argue, but not as identity. Finally, a commentary reads one sentence from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, “that thou art”, slowly, with the traditions that have argued over it for more than a thousand years.

Every page of Metanoia marks what kind of statement it is making. A historical note says what happened. A primary passage gives the words of a text, with its translator. A scholarly note reports what scholars argue, and where they disagree. A note from Metanoia is our own proposal, and is meant to be argued with. We keep these apart because the subject invites confusion between them, and because a reader who disagrees with us should be able to see exactly where.

Metanoia appears every two weeks. It is free to read online and free to download, and it will stay so. Each issue is also a door into the Library, where the authors, traditions, concepts and texts we write about have pages of their own, and into the Great Questions, which no issue will close.

Metanoia is published by the Unitive Knowledge Society. We are grateful to our first readers, and we invite your corrections.

What Is Unitive Knowledge?

An introduction to the question this journal exists to ask

By the Editors

The word *metanoia* is usually translated as repentance, but its older sense is simpler: a change of mind, a turning of the whole understanding.[1] We chose it as the name of this journal because the traditions we study describe exactly such a turning: not the acquisition of one more piece of information, but a change in the one who knows. This essay sets out the question that change raises, the question this journal exists to ask.

A kind of knowing

Most of what we call knowledge has a simple shape. There is a knower, there is something known, and there is a relation between them: a belief that is true, a perception that is accurate, a skill that works. The knower stays where they are; the known stays over there. Even our most intimate knowledge, of a friend or a piece of music, keeps something of this distance. We know about things, and we know things, but we remain ourselves while we know them.

Philosophers have long distinguished between kinds of knowledge that do not fit this shape equally well. Bertrand Russell separated knowledge by description, which is knowledge that something is the case, from knowledge by acquaintance, which is direct awareness of something without the me-

diation of any inference.[2] Acquaintance comes closer to what the contemplatives describe, but it still keeps a subject facing an object. The knowledge they speak of claims to go further: to a knowing in which the distance between knower and known is overcome, so that to know the real is in some sense to be it, or to be one with it.

By unitive knowledge we mean that claimed knowledge: knowledge by union. The phrase is ours, but the claim is not. It appears, in different vocabularies and with different emphases, in the Upaniṣads and the schools of Vedānta, in Plato and the Neoplatonists, in Christian, Jewish and Islamic mysticism, in the Daoist classics and in several schools of Buddhism. It appears in texts written centuries and continents apart by people who could not have read one another.

Some witnesses

A few examples show how varied the witnesses are. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad teaches a young man that the finest essence of all things is his own self, and ends each lesson with the refrain *tat tvam asi*, "that thou art" (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.8.7). We read that sentence closely elsewhere in this issue. Plotinus, teaching in Rome in the third century, describes the soul's return to its source as a vision in which seer and seen are no longer two, and his editor Porphyry reports that Plotinus reached that union four times in the years they spent together (Plotinus 1917, Porphyry, Life of Plotinus 23).

In the fourteenth century Meister Eckhart told his congregations that the eye with which one sees God is the same eye with which God sees one: one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love.[3] The anonymous English author of The Cloud of

Unknowing teaches that God may be reached by love but never by thought, and asks the reader to put every creature beneath a "cloud of forgetting" (The author of The Cloud of Unknowing 1912, ch. 5–6). And al-Ghazālī, after a crisis that took him from the most prestigious teaching post of his age, wrote that the Sufi path could not be learned from books, only tasted; that knowing the definition of drunkenness is not being drunk (al-Ghazālī 1909, on the Sufis).

> *Historical*
>
> These witnesses span roughly two thousand years, four major languages of scripture and philosophy (Sanskrit, Greek, Arabic and Latin, with the vernaculars that followed), and traditions with no common founder, text or institution.

What we do not claim

It would be easy to conclude from such a list that all these traditions are saying the same thing. We do not claim that, and the reasons matter for everything that follows.

First, the traditions disagree, often sharply, about what is known in unitive knowledge. For Advaita Vedānta, what is realized is the identity of the self with Brahman, the one reality without a second. For Christian mystics in the mainstream of their tradition, union with God is a union of love and will in which the creature remains a creature. For Madhyamaka Buddhism, the insight that frees is insight into emptiness, the absence of any intrinsic nature, including in any supposed absolute. These are not three words for one thing. Some of the longest and most careful arguments in the history of thought have been conducted between people who each spoke of union.

Second, the modern study of mysticism has itself divided on this question. William James gave the classic account of mystical states as ineffable, noetic, transient and passive, and was inclined to find a common core in them (James 1902, lectures XVI–XVII). Aldous Huxley gathered sayings from many traditions into a single "perennial philosophy" (Huxley 1945). Later scholars, notably Steven Katz, argued that there are no unmediated experiences: that what a mystic experiences is shaped from the start by the concepts and practices of the mystic's tradition, so that a Christian and a Buddhist contemplative do not have the same experience and then describe it differently.[4] Others replied that some states described in the literature are empty of content altogether. The debate is not settled.

Scholarship

Scholars disagree about whether there is a common core to mystical experience across traditions (the "perennialist" view associated with James, Huxley and W. T. Stace), whether every such experience is constituted by its tradition (the "constructivist" view associated with Katz), or whether some contemplative states are free of conceptual content (the view associated with Forman). Each position has serious defenders.

Third, we do not claim that unitive knowledge is real in the sense its witnesses intend. That is one of the questions, not an assumption. A journal that took the answer for granted would have nothing to ask. We take the reports seriously as reports: careful, often reluctant descriptions by intelligent people of something they held to be the most important thing they knew. What those reports show, and what they do not, is the matter under study.

Why ask the question at all

If the traditions disagree, and the scholars disagree about the traditions, why frame a journal around a single question? Because the resemblances are as real as the differences, and they are strange. People who never met, working within incompatible doctrines, describe the same movements: a turning inward, a letting go of images and concepts, a knowledge that is not about anything, a self that is found by being lost. They reach for the same paradoxes and the same negations. They warn against the same mistakes.

A resemblance of that kind calls for explanation. Perhaps it reflects a shared structure of human consciousness; perhaps a shared reality that consciousness can meet; perhaps the shared problems of any disciplined attempt to speak about the limits of speech. The explanations are not exclusive, and each has consequences. To ask which of them is true is to ask some of the oldest questions in philosophy and religion: what is ultimately real, what the self is, and whether knowledge can transform the knower. Those are the Great Questions that run through this site.

> *Metanoia's interpretation*
>
> We think the convergences are real enough to deserve patient study, and the differences deep enough that no study should end in a slogan. Our working hypothesis is a modest one: that the traditions describe a family of related transformations of knowing, which they interpret through very different accounts of what is ultimately real. We hold that hypothesis open to revision by the texts.

How to read this journal

Because the subject invites confusion between what happened, what a text says, what scholars argue and what we ourselves think, every page on this site marks what kind of statement it is making. A historical note records events and dates. A primary passage quotes a text, and names its translator. A scholarly note reports scholarship, including its disagreements. A note from Metanoia is our own view, offered for argument. When we paraphrase, we cite the passage; when we quote, we quote a published translation or give our own, and say which.

We write for readers who are not specialists but are willing to read slowly. Terms from Sanskrit, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew and Chinese are given in a scholarly transliteration and explained where they first appear; each has a page in the Library, with its uses in each tradition. Where the scholarship is contested we say so. Where we do not know, we say that too.

Unitive knowledge, if the witnesses are right, cannot be had by reading about it. None of them thought that reading was useless. They wrote, after all, and some of them wrote a great deal. They thought it could prepare, clarify and warn. That is what a journal can do, and it is the most we hope for this one: to prepare the ground for a change of mind, and to be honest about what we find there.

Notes

1. From the Greek μετάνοια, composed of meta (“after”, “beyond”) and noein (“to perceive, to think”).
2. Bertrand Russell, “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description”, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 11 (1910–11).

3. German Sermon 12 in Josef Quint's numbering. The translation is ours.
4. Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism", in Katz (ed.), Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis (Oxford University Press, 1978). Robert K. C. Forman and others replied that some contemplative states are empty of content altogether, and so cannot be shaped by concepts in that way: see Forman (ed.), The Problem of Pure Consciousness (Oxford University Press, 1990).

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The One and Brahman

Plotinus and Śaṅkara on the ground of all things

By the Editors

> *Historical*
>
> Plotinus taught in Rome in the third century CE. Śaṅkara is usually dated to the eighth century CE in India. There is no evidence that either knew of the other.

Of all the comparisons that the study of unitive knowledge invites, few are made as often as this one. Plotinus, the founder of what modern scholars call Neoplatonism, and Śaṅkara, the most influential teacher of Advaita Vedānta, both describe a single first principle from which everything proceeds and to which the self returns. Both hold that this principle cannot be adequately described. Both teach that the self's return to it is the purpose of philosophy. The resemblance has struck readers since the nineteenth century, and it has been studied closely since.

The purpose of this study is to test that resemblance against the texts, and to ask what kind of convergence it is. Our answer, argued below, is that the two thinkers converge in method and in the shape of the spiritual life, but diverge at the point that matters most to each of them: what the ultimate is.[1]

Two lives

Plotinus was born in Egypt early in the third century and studied philosophy in Alexandria under Ammonius Saccas. According to his biographer and editor Porphyry, he joined the emperor Gordian III's campaign against Persia in order to learn the philosophy practised among the Persians and the Indians; the campaign ended with the emperor's death, and Plotinus escaped to Antioch (Plotinus 1917, Porphyry, Life of Plotinus 3). He settled in Rome, where he taught for twenty-five years, and began to write only late. Porphyry arranged his fifty-four treatises into six groups of nine, the *Enneads*.

> *Historical*
>
> Porphyry's report of Plotinus's wish to learn Indian philosophy is the only direct link between the two worlds in this comparison, and it is a link that failed: Plotinus never reached Persia, let alone India.

Śaṅkara's dates are uncertain; the traditional date of 788–820 CE is now often placed earlier, in the first half of the eighth century. Hagiographies written centuries after his death describe a life of extraordinary brevity and range: renunciation as a boy, study under the teacher Govinda, travels across India in debate, and the founding of monasteries. What is secure is the work. His commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras*, the aphorisms that systematize the teaching of the Upaniṣads, became the foundational text of Advaita (Śaṅkara 1890), and his commentaries on the principal Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā* made its reading of them classical.

The two thinkers wrote in different genres. Plotinus wrote treatises that argue from first principles, often in response to questions raised in his seminars; his authorities are Plato and, less often, Aristotle. Śaṅkara wrote commentaries: his authority is revealed scripture, the Veda, and his task is to show what the Upaniṣads teach when they are read consistently. That difference of genre is itself significant. For Plotinus reason, purified, can climb to the edge of the ultimate. For Śaṅkara reason serves scripture, which alone can make known what no perception or inference reaches.

Beyond being, or being itself

Plotinus's first principle is the One, which he also calls the Good. Everything that exists is a unity of some kind, and so depends on unity; the source of all unity cannot itself be one thing among others. It is therefore, in a phrase Plotinus takes from Plato, "beyond being" (*epekeina tēs ousias*) (Plato 1871, Republic 509b). It is not a being, not even the highest being, and it does not think, since thinking requires a duality of thinker and thought. From it proceed, in order, Intellect (*nous*), in which being and thinking are one, and Soul, which animates the world.

The procession of Intellect from the One is not a choice or a making. Plotinus compares it to the light that radiates from the sun, or the heat from fire: the source gives without losing anything and without going out of itself (Plotinus 1917, V.1.6). What proceeds is lesser, but not other in the way one thing is other than another. The whole of reality is the One's overflowing, and every level of it bears the trace of the source.

Śaṅkara's Brahman, by contrast, is not beyond being. It is being itself. Commenting on the Taittirīya Upaniṣad's definition of

Brahman as *satyaṃ jñānam anantam*, "reality, knowledge, infinity", Śaṅkara explains the three terms as mutually qualifying pointers rather than properties: Brahman is what is real without dependence, what is knowledge without an object, and what is limited by nothing.[2] Brahman is not a thinker, since there is nothing outside it to think about; but it is consciousness, the light by which anything is known.

> *Scholarship*
>
> For Plotinus the One is beyond being and beyond intellect. For Śaṅkara, Brahman is being, consciousness and infinity. Scholars disagree about how much weight this difference should bear: some read it as a difference of vocabulary about a single transcendence, others as a disagreement about the nature of the ultimate itself.

Here the resemblance needs to be looked at carefully. Both thinkers deny that the ultimate is an object among objects. Both deny that it can be captured in a concept. But they deny these things for different reasons. Plotinus places the One above being and intellect because being and intellect are already a kind of multiplicity, a two-in-one, and the source of multiplicity must be simple. Śaṅkara denies that Brahman is an object because it is the subject, the witness that can never become what it witnesses. For Plotinus, intellect is the first thing below the One. For Śaṅkara, consciousness is what Brahman is.

The world: overflow and appearance

The second difference follows from the first. For Plotinus the world is real, though with a diminished reality. It is the lowest

stage of the One's outflowing, beautiful because it is an image of Intellect, and imperfect because it is only an image. Matter is at the limit of the procession, almost non-being. But nothing in the Plotinian cosmos is simply illusory. The procession is real, and the return retraces a real path.

Śaṅkara begins his commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras* with an analysis of *adhyāsa*, superimposition: the error by which we take the self for the body and the mind, and the body and the mind for the self, as one takes a rope in poor light for a snake (Śaṅkara 1890, Introduction (adhyāsa)). The world of many things is real as long as one is within that error; it is the domain of perception, action and ritual, and Śaṅkara does not dismiss it. But from the standpoint of knowledge it is an appearance, neither simply real nor simply unreal, on the one reality that does not change. The snake never existed. The rope was always there.

> *Scholarship*
>
> Whether Śaṅkara himself held a doctrine of the world as māyā in the full sense developed by later Advaita, or a more moderate view of the world as dependent and non-ultimate, is debated. Paul Hacker and others argued that the systematic doctrine of māyā belongs mainly to his successors.

The contrast is often put too simply, as if Plotinus affirmed the world and Śaṅkara denied it. Both regard the world as less than ultimate, and both regard it as grounded entirely in the ultimate. The difference is in the relation. For Plotinus the world is an effect: lesser, dependent, but really produced. For Śaṅkara the world is, in the last analysis, not produced at all, because nothing other than Brahman ever came into being; causality itself belongs to the standpoint of ignorance.

The way back

On the path of return the two thinkers come closest. For both, the self must turn away from external things, purify itself of what it is not, and discover in its own depth the presence of the ultimate. Plotinus's instruction to the soul is compressed into two words at the end of a treatise: *aphele panta*, "take away everything" (Plotinus 1917, V.3.17). The Upaniṣadic formula that Śaṅkara makes central to his teaching is equally austere: *neti neti*, "not this, not this".[3]

Both also insist that the final knowledge is not the knowledge of an object. Plotinus says the One is known not by reasoning but by a presence higher than knowledge (Plotinus 1917, VI.9.4), and he describes the culmination of the return as a vision in which the seer no longer sees an object but has become one with what is seen. Śaṅkara says that liberation is not produced by anything, not by ritual, not by meditation, not even by knowledge considered as an act; knowledge only removes the ignorance that concealed what was always the case (Śaṅkara 1890, I.1.4). For both, the goal is not reached by going somewhere. It is found where one already is.

Yet the destination is described differently. The last sentence of the *Enneads* as Porphyry arranged them calls the life of the gods and of godlike human beings *phygē monou pros monon*, which MacKenna renders "the passing of solitary to solitary" (Plotinus 1917, VI.9.11). Even at the summit there is a movement toward, and a soul that moves. Plotinus can speak of the soul becoming one with the One, and of the distinction vanishing in the vision; he can also speak of the soul coming down again, and he never says that the soul simply was the One all along. For Śaṅkara that is exactly what must be said. There is no passing

and no second solitary. The self does not become Brahman. It never was anything else.

Scholarship

Readers of Plotinus disagree about whether the soul's union with the One is a real identity, an identity of vision only, or a union in which the soul remains distinct. The passages that describe the vanishing of all difference (VI.9.10–11) and those that describe the soul's descent after union (IV.8.1) are both genuine, and different interpreters give priority to different ones.

What kind of convergence?

It is tempting to settle the comparison with a formula: Plotinus and Śaṅkara describe the same ultimate reality in different languages. The texts do not support that formula without strain. The One is beyond being and beyond consciousness; Brahman is being and consciousness. The Plotinian world is the real overflow of a real source; the world of Advaita is, from the highest standpoint, an appearance without origin. The Plotinian soul returns to its source; the Advaitin self discovers that it never left. A reader who ignores these differences has not found what the two thinkers share. They have found a third thing, their own.

But the opposite formula is equally unsatisfying. To say that the two thinkers simply disagree would miss the depth of what they share: the conviction that the ultimate is present in the depth of the self, that it is reached by subtraction rather than addition, that it cannot be an object of thought, and that the purpose of philosophy is not information but transformation. Those are not superficial resemblances. They concern the method and the goal of the whole enterprise.

Metanoia's interpretation

We suggest the difference matters: to place the ultimate beyond being is not the same as to identify it with pure being. The convergence is real, but it is a convergence of paths, not an identity of destinations. Plotinus and Śaṅkara agree on how the self must turn, and on what it must leave behind. They disagree about what it finds. A comparative study of unitive knowledge should keep both findings, and should resist the temptation to let either absorb the other.

That conclusion is itself open to testing. Later issues of Metanoia will return to the question with other pairs, and with thinkers who stand between these two positions: Christian Neoplatonists for whom God is both beyond being and being itself, and schools of Vedānta that reject Śaṅkara's reading of the Upaniṣads. The question of what is ultimately real is not settled by one comparison. It is sharpened by it.

Notes

1. The comparison has a scholarly literature of its own. See especially J. F. Staal, Advaita and Neoplatonism: A Critical Study in Comparative Philosophy (University of Madras, 1961), and R. Baine Harris (ed.), Neoplatonism and Indian Thought (State University of New York Press, 1982).
2. Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1. The translation of the three terms is ours. Later Advaita summarizes Brahman as saccidānanda, "being, consciousness, bliss", a formula more common in the tradition after Śaṅkara than in his own works.
3. Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.3.6 and elsewhere. The translations of aphele panta and neti neti are ours.

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That Thou Art

A reading of Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7

By the Editors

In the sixth book of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, Uddālaka Āruṇi instructs his son Śvetaketu through a series of images: salt dissolved in water, the seed of a fig, rivers entering the sea. Each ends with the same refrain.[1]

> It is the True. It is the Self, and thou, O Svetaketu, art it.
>
> Müller 1879, Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7

Müller renders the refrain as a direct address, keeping the second person of the Sanskrit (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.8.7). The sentence is not a proposition about selves in general. It is said to someone. This commentary reads the sentence slowly: its setting, its images, and the readings that have divided the schools of Vedānta for more than a thousand years.[2]

The setting

The sixth book opens with a homecoming. Śvetaketu has spent twelve years studying the Vedas, and returns, the text says, proud of his learning and thinking himself well read (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.1.1–2). His father asks him a single question: has he asked for that teaching by which the unheard becomes heard, the unthought becomes thought, and the unknown be-

comes known? Śvetaketu has not, and does not know what such a teaching could be.

Uddālaka answers with an image from the potter's workshop. By knowing one lump of clay, one knows everything made of clay; the pots and jars differ only in name and form, and what they really are is clay (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.1.4). The teaching he is about to give is of that kind: not one more fact, but the knowledge of that from which all things are made, and by which everything else is known. He then describes the beginning of things. In the beginning, he says, there was only being, one only, without a second, and from it, by its own intention to become many, came heat, water and food, and from their combination everything else (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.2).

> *Historical*
>
> The phrase "one only, without a second" (ekam evādvitīyam, Chāndogya 6.2.1) became one of the defining formulas of Advaita, the "non-dual" school, which takes its name from the same negation.

The images

The teaching does not begin with a definition. It begins with things a boy can hold: water, salt, a seed. The lessons that follow each take an ordinary experience and turn it toward the one being. Bees gather nectar from many trees and make it into a single honey, in which no drop knows which tree it came from (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.9). Rivers flowing east and west enter the sea and become the sea, and do not know themselves as this river or that (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.10). So creatures, Uddālaka says, come from being without knowing that they came from being.

Then the images become experiments. Śvetaketu is told to bring a fruit of the great fig tree, to break it open, then to break open one of its tiny seeds. What does he see inside? Nothing at all. From that subtle essence which he cannot see, his father tells him, the great tree stands (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.12). Next, he is told to put salt in water overnight and bring it in the morning. He cannot find the salt; it has dissolved. His father tells him to sip from the top, the middle and the bottom. It is salty everywhere. The salt is present throughout, though it cannot be seen (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.13).

The images are chosen with care. Each teaches the same lesson from a different side: that what is most real is not an object among objects, that it is subtle rather than large, that it pervades what it grounds, and that it is known not by looking at it but by tasting it everywhere. The last point matters. Śvetaketu does not see the salt. He finds that there is nowhere it is not.

Near its end the sequence turns to the most personal images of all. A man brought blindfold from the land of the Gandhāras and left in a wilderness finds his way home only when someone removes the blindfold and he asks directions from village to village; so a person who has a teacher comes to know (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.14). A dying man's speech merges into his mind, his mind into breath, his breath into heat, and heat into the highest being (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.15). The last lesson, of a man proved innocent or guilty by an ordeal of a heated axe, turns on truthfulness (Müller 1879, Chāndogya 6.16). After each image, the refrain.

The sentence

The Sanskrit is three words: *tat tvam asi*. *Tat* is "that", the subtle essence the lessons have been pointing to, the being that was in the beginning, one without a second. *Tvam* is "thou", Śvetaketu, the proud young scholar sitting in front of his father. *Asi* is "art". Grammatically the sentence is as simple as a sentence can be. Two terms are joined by the verb "to be" in the second person.

Everything depends on what that joining means. "You are that" can express identity, as in "you are the one I met yesterday". It can express membership or kind, as in "you are a scholar". It can express a relation of part and whole, or of body and indwelling soul. The Upaniṣad does not say which. It says the sentence nine times, and leaves the hearer to discover what it means for it to be true.

Two readings

> *Scholarship*
>
> Advaita reads the sentence as a statement of strict identity between the self and Brahman. Viśiṣṭādvaita reads it as the unity of a whole and its inseparable part. The grammar of the sentence alone does not settle the dispute.

Later Advaita counts the sentence among the four "great sayings" (*mahāvākyas*), one drawn from each Veda.[3] For Śaṅkara the "thou" names the witnessing consciousness once everything that can be observed has been set aside; for Rāmānuja it names the individual self as the body of the Lord who indwells it.

The Advaita reading has to explain how an identity can hold between terms that seem so unlike: the infinite source of the world and a finite young man. Its answer, worked out by Śaṅkara and systematized in later manuals, is that each term carries features that belong to it only by superimposition, and that the sentence works by setting those features aside. The usual illustration is a sentence like "this is that Devadatta", said of a man one meets again in a different place and time: the identity holds of the person, once the differences of here and there, now and then, are left out.[4] Remove from "that" its character as cause of the world, and from "thou" its character as this body and mind, and what remains in both is the same: pure consciousness, one without a second.

Rāmānuja, writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, found this reading forced. Words, he argued, do not normally mean less than they say. When scripture says "that thou art", both terms keep their full meaning and both refer, in the end, to Brahman: "that" to Brahman as the cause of the world, and "thou" to Brahman as the inner controller of the individual self, which is its body. The sentence expresses a real unity, but a unity of the kind that holds between a self and its body, not an identity that dissolves the individual. For Rāmānuja the individual self is eternally distinct from Brahman and eternally dependent on it, and its highest good is not to disappear into Brahman but to know and love it.

Scholarship

A third reading belongs to Madhva, founder of the dualist (Dvaita) school, who divided the words of the passage differently so that it could be read as "you are not that" (atat tvam asi). Most modern scholars regard this division as grammatically possible but unnatural in context. It shows how much weight the schools placed on this one sentence.

Who is addressed

Each reading gives a different answer to a question the text itself raises: who is the "thou"? It is worth noticing how the Upaniṣad has prepared that question. The whole sixth book begins with Śvetaketu's pride, and its first lesson is that everything he knows leaves out the one thing that would make it knowledge. The images then take him further and further from the kind of knowing he already had. The seed contains nothing he can see. The salt is nowhere and everywhere. By the time the refrain is spoken, he is being asked to find the subtle essence not in a seed, not in water, but in the one who is doing the looking.

This is why the second person matters. A sentence in the third person, "the self is Brahman", could be learned as a doctrine and repeated in an examination. A sentence in the second person cannot be fully understood by anyone but the one to whom it is said. The Advaita tradition makes this explicit: the great sayings are not information but instruction, and they do their work when the hearer, having been prepared, recognizes what they point to. Rāmānuja's tradition makes the same point in another key: the sentence reveals to the self its relation to the Lord, and the fitting response is devotion.

Metanoia's interpretation

We read the sentence as a question put to the reader as much as a statement: what, exactly, is the "thou" that is addressed? Each tradition's answer to that question decides its reading of the whole. Advaita answers: consciousness itself, once everything it observes is set aside. Rāmānuja answers: a real self whose whole being is to belong to the Lord. The Upaniṣad, which gives both readings room, asks the hearer to find out.

Śvetaketu, as far as the text tells us, never answers. After the ninth refrain the book simply ends, with a closing sentence that he understood. The proud young scholar of the first page has become a listener. Whatever else the sentence means, that change is part of it.

Notes

1. The rivers are at 6.10, the seed of the nyagrodha, a fig tree, at 6.12, and the salt at 6.13.
2. The refrain, tat tvam asi, closes each of the teachings from 6.8 to 6.16, nine times in all.
3. The others usually listed are prajñānaṃ brahma (Aitareya Upaniṣad 3.3), ahaṃ brahmāsmi (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.10) and ayam ātmā brahma (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 2).
4. The technique is called jahadajahallakṣaṇā or bhāgalakṣaṇā, "implication that abandons part and keeps part". It is set out in later Advaita manuals such as Sadānanda's Vedāntasāra.

Primary sources

The Upanishads, Part I: Sacred Books of the East, vol. 1. Translated by F. Max Müller. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1879.

Further reading

Śaṅkara. *The Vedânta-Sûtras, with the Commentary by Sankarâkârya: Sacred Books of the East, vols. 34 and 38*. Translated by George Thibaut. Vol. 34 (1890); vol. 38 (1896). Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1890.