

Paravidya and Aparavidya: The Twofold Path of Knowledge

Dr. Swarnaprava Biswal

Assistant Professor

Department of Philosophy

S.C.S (Auto) College

Puri, Odisha

Email:swarnpravabiswal649@gmail.com

Abstract

*In this paper, a humble attempt is made to explore the idea of ParâVidyâ and AparâVidyâ in the Indian Knowledge System. Knowledge is not a matter of thought but of action. In Indian philosophical thought, knowledge is categorized into two different yet complementary paths: **Parâvidyâ** or higher knowledge and **Aparâvidyâ** or lower knowledge. This twofold classification, rooted in the Mundaka Upanishad, provides a holistic approach to wisdom, integrating both the material and the spiritual dimensions of life. **Aparâvidyâ** refers to empirical and intellectual knowledge—mastery of sciences, technology, arts, scriptures, and all worldly disciplines. It is essential to navigate practical life, fostering technological progress, and developing human civilization. However, it remains confined to the realm of the finite and the transient. On the other hand, **Parâvidyâ** is the higher knowledge that leads to self-realization and ultimate truth. It transcends intellectual understanding and is experiential in nature, guiding one towards spiritual upliftment, liberation (moksha). Parâvidyâ reveals the unity in diversity and the eternal essence (Brahman), fostering higher consciousness and inner peace. While Aparâvidyâ provides tools to individuals for worldly success, Parâvidyâ provides the wisdom to use them responsibly, ensuring harmony between material development and spiritual upliftment. For a holistic and meaningful life balanced integration of both forms of knowledge is necessary. This twofold path offers a profound framework for ethical leadership, sustainable development, and the realization of human potential.*

Keywords: *Parâvidyâ, Aparâvidyâ, Self-realization, Upanisads, Purusârtha, Varnadharmâ, Asramadharmâ*

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 25.05.26

Approved: 02.06.26

Dr. Swarnaprava Biswal

*Paravidya and Aparavidya:
The Twofold Path of Knowledge*

*RJPSSs 2026, Vol. LII,
No. 1, Pg. 086-095
Article No.11*

Similarity Check: 07%

Online available at:

<https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/rjpsss-vol-111-no1-june-2026>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpsss.2026v52i01.011>

Introduction

Pathakāh pāthakaschaiba, ye chanye sāstrachintakāh

Sarva vyasanino murkhah yah kriyāvān sa panditah

It means, if those who keep only discussing and learning the shastras and Vedas, without any practical application of their knowledge, then they are considered as fools. Only he, whose knowledge is practically applied, is really a Pandit. Acquiring complete knowledge has both theory and practice. Because knowledge without any practice is considered as incomplete or meaningless. The role of both theory and practice are emphasized by the Upanishad and other scriptures. Both are equally needed. We cannot ignore the world which exists in and around us in space and time. It is no delusion but it has a tendency to delude us. When our mind is clouded by avidya we do not see the underlying and abiding reality behind the multiplicity and change of worldly-existence.

What is learning? How can it be classified? How does one evaluate one's learning? The Upanishads explore these fundamental questions, guiding seekers to identify the true goal and purpose of learning. In a discourse, Dr. Sudha Seshaiyan highlighted how the Upanishads emphasize that learning must lead to higher wisdom and self-realization, rather than mere accumulation of knowledge.

The Upanishads teach that intellectual knowledge (Aparavidya) is useful, but true wisdom (Paravidya) is the realization of the eternal truth (Brahman). Learning must ultimately serve the purpose of spiritual enlightenment, rather than just intellectual or ritualistic proficiency. Thus, the Upanishads inspire seekers to go beyond academic mastery and intellectual pursuits and strive for self-awareness and ultimate truth.

Saying that there is something by which everything else becomes known suggests that there is something, let's say A, that is present in all things. Knowing that common thing (A) also makes everything else composed of A known. For example in the Chāndogya Upanishad, all clay objects, such as pots, bowls, cups, etc., are made of clay. Despite the diversity of these items, they all share the common element of clay. Anyone having knowledge of clay is likewise familiar with pots, cups, bowls etc. That is to say, everything is made of clay.

The purpose of every human being is to do their best to attain ultimate happiness. The famous lawyer, the successful business man, the learned economist, or any other person runs here and there only to get pleasure. By the attainment of Paravidya it is possible to get the happiness of the soul. Every science and technology of the world is only to establish human beings in the material world, for the fulfillment of their desires. Human beings do not find eternal pleasure. Only through Paravidya

the journey of attaining the identity of the self, soul, and to attain the ultimate self is possible.

The Concept of Parāvidyā and Aparāvidyā in the Upanishads

The concept of Parāvidyā (higher knowledge) originates from the Upanishads, the philosophical texts of the Vedas, which form the foundation of Vedanta philosophy.

1. Mundaka Upanishad: The Primary Source

The Mundaka Upanishad (1.1.5-6) is the key text that first classifies knowledge into Parāvidyā and Aparāvidyā:

Aparāvidyā includes the study of the four Vedas such as Rig, Sama, Yajur, Atharva and Vedangas -grammar, astrology, rituals, etc. This knowledge is essential for worldly achievement but is not sufficient to attain liberation. Parāvidyā, the knowledge of Brahman or the ultimate reality, which is beyond the material world. It is experiential wisdom, which leads to self-realization and liberation.

Mundaka Upanishad (1.1.5-6) states that,

“Two kinds of knowledge must be known—higher (Parāvidyā) and lower (Aparāvidyā). The lower is the Vedas, phonetics, rituals, grammar, etc. The higher is that by which the imperishable Brahman is realized.”

Mundaka means razor, which shows that as a razor removes hair, so also by this Upanishad the errors of mind are removed. There are three chapters in this Upanishad. Each one is divided into two khandas. In the first mundaka, The question Śaunaka originally asked- ‘What is that by knowing which everything else becomes known? To this Angiras answers, “There are two kinds of knowledge to be acquired—the Higher and the Lower”¹. So there are two kinds of knowledge. One is higher knowledge and the other is lower knowledge. The lower one consists of four vedas, kalpa, siksha, Vyakarana, Nirukta, Chhandas and Jyotisha. The indestructible ultimate one is known by higher knowledge. In the second skanda it is said that fools consider good works and sacrifice to be the best things. In the first khanda of the second Mundaka, it is said that everything including the elements, the senses, the mountains, the rivers has been born from the divine Person. In the third verse of the second Khanda of the third Mundaka, it is said that the self cannot be gained by the vedas, nor by intellect, nor by knowledge of the scriptures. He whom the self chooses, The Self chooses him as his own.

2. Chandogya Upanishad: The Story of Narada and Sanatkumara

In the Chandogya Upanishad (7.1.1-3), Sage Narada approaches Sanatkumara seeking knowledge. Narada admits that he has mastered many sciences (Aparāvidyā) but has not attained peace and self-realization. Sanatkumara guides

him towards Parāvidyā, teaching him that true knowledge lies in realizing Brahman, the eternal, unchanging reality.

Lower knowledge or Aparāvidyā consists of learning the shastras and science. But Parāvidyā consists in self-realization. It is the realization of the infinite which is supreme. *Yo vai Bhuma tat Sukham.*² Parāvidyā is direct experience of ultimate reality whereas Aparāvidyā is an indirect mode of knowledge. So long as one does not realize the unbound, all pervading, immortal self, can not overcome the worldly desire, attachment, pain and suffering. But he who realizes this, does not see destruction, decay, pain, suffering, illness and becomes immortal. When our mind is clean and pure, this realization is possible. Paravidyā or self-realization is that which bestows immortality and eternal bliss.

3. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: The Self as the Ultimate Knowledge

This Upanishad emphasizes that knowing the Self (Atman) is the highest wisdom. It explains that all knowledge culminates in the realization that the individual self (Atman) is one with the Supreme Brahman.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (4.4.19) states:

“He who knows the Self transcends sorrow and becomes immortal.”

Paravidyā is the highest vidya or liberating knowledge. This is the knowledge of Non-dual reality. In order to receive knowledge, an individual must have desire for that and should know the worth of the knowledge. There are other branches of knowledge which are considered as inferior knowledge. But it has also advantages. Lower knowledge or Aparāvidyā which comprehends the Vedas along with Vedangas, whereas the knowledge of Brahman is considered to be higher knowledge or Parāvidyā which can not be attained by mere learning but by detachment from the worldly objects of enjoyment.

The great message of this Upanishad is that our pain and sufferings are due to a partial vision of things. Unless we have a total vision of anything we cannot be happy. When we evaluate a thing, we should consider its internal and external nature and transcendent reality. None of these can be ignored. Then only we shall realize that the reality of anything is the reality of everything. So true knowledge is not information only, it is not the function of intellect, but it is direct experience of ultimate reality. Knowledge is experience. Knowledge is being.

4. Bhagavad Gita's Connection to Paravidya

Although not an Upanishad, the Bhagavad Gita (7.2-3) also reflects the Upanishadic distinction between lower and higher knowledge: Krishna tells Arjuna

that knowledge of the material world (Aparavidya) is useful but limited. The highest wisdom is self-knowledge and devotion to the Supreme (Paravidya).

Bhagavad Gita 7.16-19:

“Among thousands, only a few strive for perfection, and among those, only a rare one truly knows Me.”

In Lower knowledge or Aparāvidyā, one thinks that the phenomenal world is only real. But in higher knowledge one realizes that Brahman alone is real. Lower knowledge is the empirical knowledge, knowledge about the empirical world. In Aparāvidyā there is a dichotomy between subject and object. But in higher knowledge one realizes one ultimate reality in every finite object. The subject realizes the object within. This is Paramārthika Jñāna or pure knowledge. By becoming the object, the subject knows the object. So the highest knowledge is the union or oneness of the individual soul with the supreme soul. The Knower of Brahman, becomes Brahman (Mun.op.iii.ii.9) by knowing which everything is known.

Relation Between Parāvidyā and Aparāvidyā

The Upanishads describe two types of knowledge—Aparāvidyā (lower knowledge) and Parāvidyā (higher knowledge). Among these, Parāvidyā is hailed as the supreme knowledge, as it leads to ultimate realization. Aparāvidyā refers to Empirical gained through the intellect and senses, encompassing all empirical and objective learning. Since empirical knowledge is based on a knower, the known, and the process of knowing, it remains bound by the finite realm of experience. In contrast, Parāvidyā is the knowledge of the Self (Atman) and Brahman, the ultimate reality.

Parāvidyā is said to be knowledge by identity whereas Aparāvidyā gives us knowledge by appearance. There is always a distinction between ‘that’ and ‘what’, between the subject and the object .

Vidya is generally understood as knowledge and Avidyā stands for absence of knowledge or ignorance. But in Upanishadic epistemology Vidyā does not mean mere knowledge nor avidya stands for no-knowledge here. Here Vidyā means knowledge of reality and knowledge about the empirical world is regarded as Avidyā. When our knowledge is being limited to only the empirical sphere that leads to avidya. But to know the world to be empirically real and the absolute to be transcendently real is called vidya. It is not merely to know something rather the realisation of the ultimate reality . Ignorance is not negative . It is positive These are the two different levels, one is the lower and another is the higher.

The Upanishads emphasize that the true purpose of human life is to attain Parāvidyā. Without striving for this higher wisdom, one remains under ignorance and worldly illusions. By removing false identifications, cutting the bonds of ignorance, Parāvidyā liberates the seeker which leads to self-realization and divine consciousness . One becomes free from the cycle of birth by attaining Parāvidyā.

According to Mundaka Upanishad Brahmā told his eldest son Atharvan that the knowledge of Brahman is the foundation of all knowledge . Brahma Vidyam Sarva-Vidya Pratishtham. Then Atharvan taught this knowledge to Angiras and he taught it to Satyavaha, the son of Bharadvaj and Saunaka who is a house holder interested in acquiring knowledge. By transcending the delusive state the higher knowledge or Parāvidyā can be attained .

But the question is who is able to attain the highest knowledge ?and how it is possible . Through self realisation one is able to attain the highest knowledge. The self-realization which is the ultimate goal of human life is not possible or can never be achieved by a morally imperfect person . So those who aspire for self realization must have to practice different virtues of human life. A morally imperfect person can never achieve the highest knowledge . Because he can't know Brahman. Only a knower of Brahman can become Brahman.

Varna vyavastha, Ashrama Dharma and Purushartha constitute upanishadic ethics.

It is easier to transform from lower knowledge to higher knowledge or self knowledge through an ethically disciplined way of living. In Katha Upanishad it is mentioned that the result of alienation from the real is evil. We cannot attain freedom without breaking with evil. Here evil is understood as evil deeds and freedom means salvation, liberation or the realisation of the highest knowledge. A person who is untouched by sin and unaffected by evil is fit to attain higher knowledge . So moral actions constitute refraining from evil deeds.

Varna Dharma

According to the quality (guna) and action(karna) of a person varnadharma is determined. There are four different varnas produced by Lord Krishna. Brahmana, kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra (chapter 4 of Bhagavad Gita). So the classification of varnas are efficiency based. Each one should perform their duty selflessly. Different classes are not determined by their birth, rather these classes are volatile in nature. Everyone can perform the duty of the other. Their duties are complementary to each other. The duty of Sudra is as important as that of a Brahmana. Devoted to his own duty, a man attains perfection , The Lord Krishna Says (B.G, XVIII - 45).

Ashrama Dharma

There are also four stages of ashrams in human life . In order to have a planned and disciplined life one must undergo four different stages of ashramas. The four different stages are Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vānaprastha and Sanyasa . In the last stage the ego sense of the being is removed and realise the ultimate self. The first stage is a preparatory stage for household life. In this stage the child is ready to acquire knowledge for himself. A disciplined life starts with acquisition of knowledge . In the second stage a man has to cultivate love which is a preparatory stage for divine love . A person learns how to share love in a family then extends towards the fellow beings of the society. In the Vānaprastha stage man starts the practice of detachment, morality and renunciation of worldly objects and proceeds towards spiritual life . In this stage a man prepares himself for the last asrama that is Sanyasa ashrama. In the last stage a person realises his own self, what is pure renunciation and in what way he is connected with the ultimate reality. A Sanyasi realises himself by refraining from selfish desire.

Purusārtha

Whatever is meaningful and valuable for human life is called purusartha . There are four cardinal virtues - Kama, Artha, Dharma and Moksha. The first three are related to our worldly life and the last one is related to spiritual life . In order to fulfill desire we need money or artha. Artha satisfies human desire . So Artha is the means and Kama is the end . When artha and kama are regulated or guided by Dharma, moral principles lead to Moksha . Dharma is not used as a religious concept rather as a philosophical or moral concept . It is related to the practical life of human being. Dharma means righteousness, dutifulness and responsibility. Moksha is considered as param purusartha . It is the state of realisation of self. In this state there is no duality . It is the state of oneness, the self is not different from the supreme self . He sees himself in everybody and everybody in himself. He feels unity in diversity. The whole world becomes a family Vasudhaiva kutumbakam. In the words of Prof. B.Kar: Dharma is said to be a significant move towards the maintenance of social stability and harmony. It works as a guiding and regulating principle on the basis of which kama and artha are well balanced so that the social cohesion remains intact.³ Kama without dharma and moksha would be like an animal , artha without dharma is mere greed. Dharma without moral principle would be mere rituals. Without all these three Moksha becomes impossible. All these four Purusharthas are equally important for a moral life.

As the ladle is required for preparing the delicious food , similarly the Vedic knowledge and the knowledge of other Shastras is required to refine and churn

one's intellect and discernment. The deeper knowledge (knowledge of Brahman) can't be conveyed by itself. It is the outcome of all the fermenting, churning and refining that the individual intellect has undergone. Thus, Aparā Vidya is a stepping stone in the process of the attainment of Parāvidyā. "One who has done shravana, manana, and nididhyāsan on Paramātmā properly and attained realization (Paravidya) has known everything. There is nothing else left for him to see, hear, know, or contemplate".t

Conclusion

Aparavidya deals with intellectual, ritualistic, and worldly sciences. It helps in practical life but is temporary. The Upanishads establish Paravidya as the path to ultimate truth—beyond intellectual knowledge, rituals, or external learning. True wisdom is the direct experience of Brahman (pure consciousness), which liberates one from ignorance and suffering. Parāvidyā (higher knowledge) leads to Brahman realization, transcending birth and death. Self-Realization is the ultimate goal of human life, according to the Upanishads. Aparavidya can prepare the seeker for it. All worldly knowledge or Aparavidya is limited and leads to sorrow unless one attains self-knowledge or Parāvidyā. The purpose of Parāvidyā and Aparāvidyā are different yet complementary in the Indian knowledge system. Overall, the concept of the way of life in the Indian knowledge system provides principles and practices of purposeful, moral knowledge systems that human beings can follow to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life. It also provides a sense of community and allows individuals to connect with their traditional and spiritual heritage. It offers guidance on how to live a complete and harmonious life.

Aparā Vidyā is not rejected by the Upanishadic vision; instead, it places it in the right relationship with Parā Vidyā. Aparā Vidyā prepares the human mind by cultivating discipline, intellectual rigor, clarity, and preparing it capable of receiving higher knowledge. Parā Vidyā then gives direction and meaning to the skills and intelligence gained through Aparā Vidyā, ensuring that material progress is directed and controlled by ethical awareness and spiritual insight. Both the extremes of materialism without values and spirituality without practical grounding are prevented by them.

The ultimate goal of human life is to attain this ParaVidya and it is held that if we wouldn't achieve this, then we would waste our whole life time. Parāvidyā destroys the bonds of ignorance and leads to God realisation. It frees one from the birth and rebirth cycle.

The significance of Parā and Aparā Vidyā is profound in the context of modern education and parenting. The modern education system focused solely on Aparā Vidyā no doubt producing skilled human beings but are directionless, while neglect of Aparā Vidyā can lead to impractical idealism. But integrating both encourages balanced progress—competence with humanity, success with sensitivity, and intelligence with wisdom. This ancient framework offers a timeless guide for teachers, researchers, and parents to nurture people who are not only intelligent but also self-aware and socially responsible. In essence, both Para Vidyā and Aparā Vidyā unitedly represent the ancient Indian vision of education as a journey from mere information to transformation, from knowing the world to knowing oneself.

Notes

1. Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), *The Mundak Upanishad*, (Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015) pg-9.
2. C.U.VII. 23.1
3. Kar, B. (2000). *Value perspectives in Indian philosophy*. New Delhi, India: Mittal Publications.
4. Ferrer, A. (2018). Integral education in ancient India: From Vedas and Upanishads to Vedanta. *International Journal of Research – Granthaalayah*, 6(6), 281–295.

References

1. Bhandari, M. C. (Ed.). (1995). *Para-vidya: Science of the beyond*. New Delhi, India: D.K. Printworld.
2. Chatterjee, S. and Datta, D. (2012), 'An Introduction to Indian Philosophy', Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi -02.
3. Chakravarti, S.C. (1935), *The Philosophy of The Upanishads*. Calcutta University Press, Calcutta.
4. Dasgupta, S. (1922). *A History of Indian Philosophy, Vol. 1*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Dasgupta, S.N. (2012), 'A History of Indian Philosophy', Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi.
6. Ferrer A. (2018), Integral education in ancient India from Vedas and Upanishads to Vedanta. *International Journal of Research-Granthaalayah* ;6(6): Pg. **281-295**.
7. Gupta SS. (2018), Science of Spirit (Para Vidya) vs Science of Consciousness (Apara Vidya) Know Thyself Before Knowing Consciousness. *Journal of Psychological and Psychiatry Studies* ;1(102): Pg. **10-20**.

8. Kar, Vijayananda,(2000) *Value Perspectives in Indian Philosophy*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi,
9. Misra, S.,(1988), *Central Philosophy of Upanishads*. Santosh Publications, Cuttack
10. Prasad, Ramanuj.(2006), *Know The Upanishads*. Delhi: Pustak Mahal.
11. Radhakrishnan, S. (1923), '*Indian Philosophy*', Vol-1, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London
12. Radhakrishnan, S.(1953), *The Principal Upanishads*. Delhi: Oxford University press.
13. Singh, Balbir.(1983)*The Philosophy of Upanishads*. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann.
14. Sinha, J. (1956), '*History of Indian Philosophy*', Vol-1, Sinha Publishing; Calcutta.
15. Sinha, J. (2002), '*Outlines of Indian Philosophy*', New Central Book Agency (P) Ltd., Calcutta -09.