

# ACROSS THE MILLENNIA

## *Applying “Know Thyself” to Daily Life*

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**B**oth pre-historical and historical traditions deal with the art of understanding oneself. This essay examines the Delphic concept that by knowing ourselves we also come to know God. Modern science and quantum problems associated with the persistence of the genetic code are also aspects of this ancient dialogue from the point of view of the Noble Prize Laureate, physicist Erwin Schrödinger. We are invited to ponder how the ancient philosophical teachings about knowing ourselves are applicable to our modern life.

The task of understanding ourselves is the most important and the most difficult in our lives. However, if we do not know ourselves we go through darkness, uncertainty, and despair—our life lacks value and meaning. A human life without worth appears to be insignificant; people feel that

they are powerless victims of a pitiless fate, alone and abandoned as an autumn leaf in the storm of events.

When we finally make the effort of working on our inner selves, according to the ancient injunction, we become, all at once, the investigator, the process of investigation, and the object of observation. What a task!

What is the real meaning of the verb “to know” in this elevated context?

I am not trying to solve the riddle, for that is the personal task of each one of us. However, we are presented with the opinions of mystics across millennia of historic wisdom. May their words illuminate our hearts and understanding.

### **Most Ancient Wisdom**

It is impossible to establish the epoch when, for the first time, the evolving human consciousness asked the question, “Who am I?” However, we can assume that it was more than 5,000 years ago, since an answer to that inquiry is engraved in stone in the ancient temple of Luxor (built about 1500 BCE) in Thebes, Egypt:

“The human body is the house of God. That is why it is said: Know Thyself!”

In the same temple, we also find the advice:

“The best and shortest road toward the knowledge of Truth is Nature.

“Your body is the temple of knowledge.”<sup>1</sup>

From these sage sayings, we can deduce the teaching that the universal truth can be found both in nature and in the human body; therefore, by understanding nature and ourselves we can know God. Martinists today still refer to this as studying the Book of Humanity and the Book of Nature. How has this been seen across ages and cultures?



H. Spencer Lewis, *Priestess in Egypt*.

## Ancient Egypt

For the Egyptians, order and harmony were the true manifestations of the Divine, therefore, we can infer that by finding and maintaining order and harmony in ourselves, we can illuminate our divine essence. We can admire order and harmony in nature and in the whole universe: humans are part of nature, part of the universe, we cannot be different, nor can we be separated.

We must search for the correct and essential aspects of ourselves and not be distracted by the apparent confusion, doubt, and guilt that seizes our superficial ego when we feel separated from God. We should not confuse ignorance with knowledge. The ancient mystics were very precise in their teachings, as in this timeless Egyptian proverb: “The way of knowledge is narrow.”<sup>2</sup>

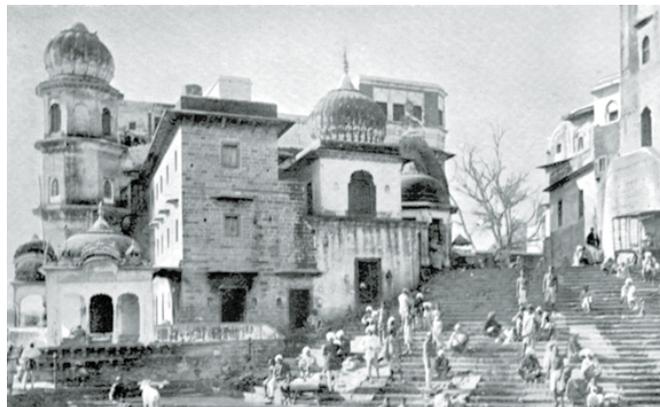
## Ancient Vedic Traditions

In India, approximately during the same pre-historic period, the Vedic tradition was teaching: “Thou art THAT,” meaning that the Real Self of each human being is identical with the Divine Universal Self of All.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, according to the most ancient Sanskrit tradition, each human is essentially a pure, immortal soul that is permanently related to the One Cosmic Intelligent Power, called *Brahman*.

The [Bhagavad-Gita](#) says:

“With the self unattached to external contacts, they (the knowers of Brahman) find happiness in the Self, with the self engaged in meditation on Brahman they attain to endless happiness . . . . They attain absolute freedom—whose sins have been destroyed, whose perception of dualities are torn asunder—who are self-controlled and intent on the welfare of all beings . . . . With the senses, the intellect ever controlled, having liberation as their supreme goal, free from desire, fear, and anger—the sage is verily liberated forever.”<sup>4</sup>

From the [Yajur-Veda](#) derives the teaching of the [Isa Upanishad](#).

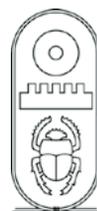


Bathing in the Sacred Ganges at Hardwar (India), from William Crooke, *Popular Religion and Folk-Love of Northern India*, 1896.

“All is perfect, so perfectly perfect!  
Whatever being lives, moves  
And breathes on Earth  
At every level from atom to galaxy  
Is absolutely perfect in its place  
Precise and choreographed.  
Because ‘That’ flows from the Glory  
of God,  
The Lord,  
The Self,  
Consciousness,  
The Source,  
Awareness, Peace, and Love,  
And is therefore Perfect.  
When you have surrendered your ego  
To ‘That,’  
You will find true happiness.  
Never ever envy the place of  
Any other man or woman.”<sup>5</sup>

A modern exponent of the Upanishads recently emphasized these points in lectures on Vedic philosophy at the Ottawa Hindu Temple:

“Whether I say thank you or not, the sun shines, the wind blows, the rain rains and the earth moves, but by saying ‘Thank you’ for their functions in this creation, and by expressing my deep sense of gratitude to them, I realize the true nature of my own self and my own function in this creation.



“The moment I realize myself as One with the entire creation, I find new zest, a new joy and a new enthusiasm in life. I realize that, to make others happy is also my happiness; to serve others and to help them to achieve their life’s fulfilment is also my fulfilment.

“All existence is Divine. This means that our essential nature is Divine. Life lived without the consciousness of one’s Divine nature is indeed trivial. It is a life of darkness, of ignorance, sorrow and distress. It is a life of spiritual blindness. Those who let themselves live in such a spiritual blindness are really hurting themselves, they are called by the Upanishad ‘spiritual suicide.’

“One is always seeking happiness—why? Because one’s very nature is Happiness. One is always seeking freedom—why? Because one’s very nature is Freedom. One wishes to live a longer and longer life—why? Because one’s very nature is Immortality.

“In other words, what one really wants in life is only to be oneself—nothing more, nothing less. If so, what is that One-Self? That, one has to discover for oneself, by oneself, through enquiry. That is indeed the overriding purpose of life—so say the Upanishads. One’s real teacher is always The Self I, already in oneself.”<sup>6</sup>

### Classical Greece and Rome

In central Greece, in the sacred Temple of Apollo at Delphi, built between the two peaks of Mount Parnassus, the words “Know Thyself” were engraved in stone. This famous Sanctuary where the Oracle prophesized, was first built around 800 BCE and was an important spiritual center for the Greeks and the Romans.

However, not everyone understood the subtly transcendent meaning of the injunction, “Know Thyself.” For example, the Roman poet Juvenal (first-second centuries CE), in one of his brilliant Satires, quotes the phrase in Greek and suggests that the precept descended from heaven, because

to understand oneself is to understand others as well.

In addition, he goes on to demonstrate that the saying may also refer to more personal considerations, such as knowing one’s own habits, customs, character, ability to control emotions, and other aspects of our behavior. He shows its importance even for mundane things, such as shopping and dining:

“Rightly do I despise a person who knows how much higher Atlas is than all the other mountains of Africa, and yet knows not the difference between a purse and an iron-bound money-box.

“The maxim ‘Know Thyself’ comes down to us from the skies; it should be imprinted in the heart, and stored in the memory, whether you are looking for a wife, or wishing for a seat in the sacred Senate . . . . If you are preparing to conduct a great and difficult cause, take counsel of yourself and tell yourself what you are—are you a great orator, or just a spouter . . . ?

“Let people take their own measure and have regard to it in things great or small, even in the buying of a fish, that they set not their heart upon a mullet, when they have only a gudgeon in their purse. For if your purse is getting empty while your maw is expanding, what will be your end when you have sunk your inheritance and all your



The Treasury of Athens at Delphi. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

belongings in a belly which can hold capital and solid silver as well as flocks and lands?”<sup>7</sup>

The different opinions and interpretations of this injunction show that humans have different levels of understanding and evolution. Nevertheless, the statement “Know Thyself” is useful for all. Some try to purify their personal ego, others transcend to the knowledge of God. Nevertheless, these two processes are fundamentally related, as without full dominion over the mundane, personal ego, it is not possible to proceed effectively on the spiritual path.

### Philosophers and Orphic Initiates

Several ancient Greek philosophers, such as Thales of Miletus (625-546 BCE), Pythagoras of Samos (569-ca. 475 BCE), Socrates (470-399 BCE), and Plato, (427-347 BCE), as well as the Orphic Initiates, interpreted the injunction in the highest spiritual sense and stated “Human, know thyself, and thou shalt know the universe and the Gods.” They also pondered the questions, “What should we do, in order to know ourselves and God?” and “Is there a secret method available to accomplish this?”

The pre-historic hero Orpheus was believed to be the musician who perfected the use of the lyre. Orpheus received this musical instrument directly from the god Apollo in the Temple of Delphi. The beautiful god Apollo was the leader of the Muses and patronized the arts and music. Orpheus, being his disciple, could charm wild beasts with the sound of his lyre and with the magic of his singing voice he could coax trees and rocks into dance.

In addition to this legend, Orpheus was also said to be the originator of the adaptation of Greek religion known as Orphism. This philosophy understood human nature to be in part divine, a spark from Dionysus, the ancient Thracian god, and in part mundane, taken from the flesh of the Titans, the ancient world rulers who had murdered Dionysus.

Orphism stressed a strict standard of ethical and moral conduct involving ascetic practices and purification. Coming to know itself as Divine, the divine human soul could be liberated from its Titanic inheritance through initiation into the Orphic mysteries and through a divine identification now, and also through the process of reincarnation to fully return to its divine origin. Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato were all influenced by the Delphic and Orphic traditions of what it meant to “Know Thyself.”<sup>8</sup>

Many methods practiced by the Greek mystical tradition are very useful in attaining knowledge of self and of the Divine. Silence, serenity, purification, order, harmony, discipline, music, meditation, chanting, and expansion of consciousness are methods which have proven very useful for human evolution. Personal intense aspiration, firm desire and perseverance of the seeker are essential components for attaining real success in the task.

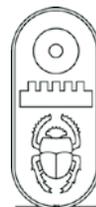
This spiritual way of life can be experienced today in many contexts. The modern Rosicrucian and Martinist traditions reflect this same goal. The Fire is still burning, and the Flame will never die.

### Modern Wisdom and Quantum Physics

The quest for the “knowledge, wisdom, and understanding” of our life and of the



Gold stater issued by the city of Lampsacus, ca. 360–340 BCE, Dionysos-Priapos crowned with an ivy wreath. Musée de Louvre. Photo © Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, used with permission.



mystery of the universe has changed aspects across millennia, yet remains as elusive as it always was.

In our day science tells us that the building blocks of our physical being are our genetic code. According to modern science, all living beings are the manifestation of their inherited genetic codes. Therefore, humans are the physical expression of certain types of amino acids and proteins related to each other in a specific fashion in the cellular nucleus. However, it is not clear how such delicate interactions persist, unchanged across millennia.

In recent times, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, Erwin Schrödinger, asks the relevant question:

“The mere fact that we speak of hereditary properties indicates that we recognize the permanence to be almost absolute. For we must not forget that what is passed on by parents to the child . . . is the whole (four dimensional) pattern of the phenotype . . . which is reproduced without appreciable change for generations, . . . and borne at each transmission by the material structure of the nuclei of the two cells which unite to form the fertilized egg cell.”<sup>9</sup>

“. . . a gene contains certainly not more than about a million, or a few million atoms. That number is much too small . . . to entail an orderly and lawful behavior according to statistical physics.”<sup>10</sup>

“How are we to understand that it has remained unperturbed by the disordering tendency of the heat motion for centuries?”<sup>11</sup>

“. . . the laws of physics are statistical laws. They have a lot to do with the natural tendency of things to go over into disorder. But, to reconcile the high durability of the hereditary substance with its minute size, we had to evade the tendency to disorder by inventing the molecule . . . life seems to be orderly and lawful behavior of matter, not based exclusively on its tendency to go over from order to disorder, but based

partly on existing order that is kept up . . . living matter is likely to involve ‘other laws of physics’ hitherto unknown . . .”<sup>12</sup>

These unknown laws of physics must exist because the precise manifestation of living matter is expressed in the genetic code which does not “go over into disorder across ages,” argues Schrödinger.

Schrödinger speaks about the importance of what he calls “negative entropy” for maintaining life and health. “. . . entropy, taken with the negative sign, is itself a measure of order.”<sup>13</sup>

“To reconcile the high durability of the hereditary substance with its minute size, we had to evade the tendency to disorder . . . It is by avoiding the rapid decay into the inert state of ‘equilibrium’ that an organism appears so enigmatic; so much so that. . . some supernatural force (*vis viva, entelechi*) was claimed to be operative in the organism.”<sup>14</sup>

“How does the living organism avoid decay? . . . a living organism continually increases its (positive) entropy . . . and thus tends to approach the dangerous state of maximum entropy, which is death. It can only keep . . . alive by continually drawing from its environment negative entropy—which is something very positive . . .”<sup>15</sup>

Schrödinger further develops his hypothesis by saying that “. . . the living organism feeds upon negative entropy, attracting as it were a stream of negative entropy upon itself to compensate the entropy increase it produces by living.”<sup>16</sup>

### Cosmic Energy

This is theoretically logical, and clear, but from where does this “negative” entropy, or “free energy” come? A brief answer is: cosmic energy.

Nevertheless, here we must abandon the complex discussions of the scientist Schrödinger to express in a few words what we already know. The same energy that promotes the life-giving phenomenon of



Border Stele of Akhenaten and Nefertiti showing the Cosmic Energy of the Aten.

photosynthesis is the “free energy” that we absorb from the “Light that gives Light to the Stars.”

As Einstein explained,  $E = mc^2$ , that is, Energy equals mass times the speed of light-squared. In Hermetic terms, we could say: Conscious, Eternal, Infinite Light is the Source of All.

Linking science to the ancient wisdom, we learn that our conscious physical interaction with nature will help us “Know Ourselves” and also to stay healthy, as we actually are THAT, the Conscious “I AM.”

As Schrödinger finally concludes, “Subject and object are only one. The barrier between them cannot be said to have broken down as a result of recent experience in physical sciences, for this barrier does not exist.”<sup>17</sup> Schrödinger does not actually speak about “knowing God,” but he comes closest here.

### Practical Application in Daily Life

These teachings are very ancient, but perfectly applicable to our modern life. We must grasp the reality that humans are Divine, that there is no other happiness but the profound, constant communication and attunement with the Cosmic. The Self that we must know is the superior Self and not a list of negativities related to the personal ego. We are not the body.

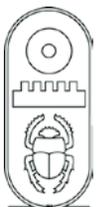
### Rosicrucian Traditions Concerning Knowing Oneself

Former Imperator Ralph M. Lewis writes, “Self-analysis . . . : It is because of an intense urge to look upon ourselves, to analyze ourselves and our environment, that we learn to do many exceptional things. Otherwise we would contribute very little to the advancement of humanity and the progress of society.

“Our natural attributes are mostly within us. Therefore, we are not fully aware of them. We accomplish certain things in life with these powers but whence we derived them, we are not quite certain . . . .

“Self-analysis does more than disclose our attributes. It also reveals our limitations, the things not yet possible of accomplishment by us. It shows how far we are behind those ideals that we recognize as a state of perfection. It points definitively where we need to improve ourselves.

“But there is still a second quality . . . and that is aspiration. Aspiration consists of those sensations and desires and wants of the self as distinguished from the passions of the body. Aspiration finds its gratification in the realizing of a need or some ideal which we have set for ourselves. Though reason in self-analysis may disclose our lack of something, it is aspiration that causes us to seek to fulfil



the need and to lift ourselves up and beyond our present status.”<sup>18</sup>

If we analyze this, five truths emerge:

1. Self-analysis is a natural urge
2. It reveals our attributes and limitations
3. It makes us aware of an ideal and desirable state of “perfection”
4. An innate “aspiration” helps us lift ourselves out of routine
5. It consists of the gratification of a higher ideal

The secret method to know God and our selves is no longer a secret. Harmony, sacred music, meditation, inner silence, and vowel chanting are tools that help us clear our vibrations from all imperfections. The basic methods of the Rosicrucian path are related to these practices that help our personal evolution.

With loving performance of these techniques, we will modify our mundane vibrations into more and more subtle ones. We will finally attune to the Divine vibrations and gain the certainty of our real essence. We will merge into great joy, beauty, and profound peace.

Nevertheless, we must remember that, according to the literal meaning of the verb “to know,” the human soul, incarnated in an earthly body, is unable to transmit to human consciousness the tremendous brilliancy of cosmic powers.

Incarnated humans cannot fully “know God.” However, we can certainly “know” the God of our heart, with loving, longing, and pure desire.

With persistent practice, by refining our vibrations and by liberating ourselves from useless worries, we may be able to calm the chatting of the brain, and in the absolute silence of a meditation “without an object” we may have a glimpse of the eternal splendor that is our real being. This wonderful experience may happen only a few times during a given life; however, it is sufficient to give us the “certainty” of our Divine ground and of our true eternal life.

Such experience is described in sacred text as “illumination” and is a wonderful gift by the grace of God to the sincere, persistent, and passionate seeker, as revealed to us by the many great mystics of human history.

We are grateful to the sages of ancient times for having uncovered this supreme secret in order to give us the opportunity to “know ourselves,” to grow, and to evolve.

*We exist in the eternal now.  
The future constantly converts itself into now,  
Then instantly becomes the past,  
Like a stream rushing down a mountainside.*<sup>19</sup>



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> These three proverbs are found in Isha Schwaller de Lubicz, *Her-Bak: The Living Face of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Inner Traditions, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See “Tat Tvam Asi” in *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tat\\_Tvam\\_Asi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tat_Tvam_Asi).

<sup>4</sup> *The Bhagavad-Gita, Fifth discourse, 21-25-28*, trans. Sri Swami Sivananda (Durban, South Africa: The Divine Light Trust Society, 2003), 76-77.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Jacobs, *The Principal Upanishads* (New York: O Books Publishing Co., 2003), 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Srinivas Sourirajan, “Lectures on the Upanishads” (Lecture, Ottawa Hindu Temple, Spring 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Juvenal, *Satire 11*, trans. in G.G. Ramsey, *Juvenal and Persius* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1918). The whole very enjoyable Satire is available at [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/juvenal\\_satires\\_11.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/juvenal_satires_11.htm).

<sup>8</sup> W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, (New York: Norton, 1967).

<sup>9</sup> Erwin Schrödinger, *What Is Life? Mind and Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 47

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 68

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 73

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 70

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 70-71

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 73

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 137

<sup>18</sup> Ralph M. Lewis, *Sanctuary of Self* (San Jose: Supreme Grand Lodge of AMORC, 1948), 201.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Lee, *Practical Mysticism* (San Jose: Grand Lodge of the English Language Jurisdiction, AMORC, 2005), 58.