

As the academic year begins, what can the Upanisads teach us about AI and learning?

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AI generated image.

As artificial intelligence reshapes classrooms, ancient Upanisadic narratives offer timeless lessons on true [knowledge](#), patient inquiry, and meaningful intellectual growth.

“Can artificial intelligence replace gurus in India?” The question arose during a recent conversation with a colleague on her podcast, Rational Pulse, and has stayed with me ever since. Perhaps this is because I have studied guru-bhakti communities on the peripheries of Delhi since 2015, or because my engagement with India’s gurus extends beyond academic research to projects such as the Indian Saint Project and Singing Oneness. Gradually, however, the question opened onto a broader problem: the relationship between knowledge, knowing, and transformation in the age of artificial intelligence.

The recent celebration of Guru Purnima, coinciding with the beginning of the academic year, makes this question particularly timely. Over the past two years, AI has become embedded in academic life. Students tell me they struggle to write even an email without it, let alone an assignment or exam answer. Academic texts are often no longer read but uploaded, summarized, and delivered on a digital spoon. Yet students are not alone. Professors and researchers use AI to draft emails, structure arguments, prepare lectures, and polish prose, often while lamenting its effects on their students.

This is no longer a nostalgic complaint. It is simply what academic life looks like in 2026. And so the question returns: What is the role of teachers and gurus when information can be produced within seconds? And what, in this new landscape, do knowledge and learning even mean? While countless articles and op-eds have already been published on this topic, I hope to offer an ancient Indian perspective on a problem that is distinctly

contemporary, yet deeply human. In a foundational course on ancient Indian thought that I [teach](#) at O.P. Jindal Global University, students encounter two questions that lie at the heart of several Indian philosophical traditions: Who am I? And how can knowledge become embodied, transforming the seeker at the deepest level? The first question asks what is true about the self and existence.

The second asks how a truth that can be expressed in words becomes a lived form of knowing, one that reshapes how a person experiences the self and the world. Ancient Indian traditions clearly recognized this gap. Even if I were to give you the absolute truth about the self and existence, simply hearing it would not be enough to bring about the profound transformation required for liberation. I can write two of the Upanisadic mahavakyas on this screen, and any AI system could provide them within seconds: Aham Brahmasmi — “I am Brahman.” Ayam Atma Brahma — “This Self is Brahman.” There. You have received the secret [teaching](#) of the Upanisads. The true self is not the limited self with which we identify in everyday life. It is not our personal identity, made up of name, body, gender, religion, class, profession, and biography. At the deepest level, atman, the self, is not separate from brahman, the absolute. The self and the absolute are one. Are you liberated from the cycle of birth and death? Has anything in you changed? Do you now see yourself, others, and the world differently? The answer, of course, is no. Ancient Indian traditions understood this problem of instant knowledge, what we might anachronistically call the AI problem. Knowledge alone does not transform the seeker. The Upanisads, which form the concluding sections of the Vedas, contain many narratives of learning—stories that reveal how knowledge can become a lived form of knowing.

In the Chandogya Upanisad, for example, Indra, king of the gods, comes to Prajapati, the primordial creator and lord of creatures, to learn from him about the nature of the true self. He is accompanied by Virocana, leader of the asuras, the powerful rivals of the gods. Prajapati here takes on the role of the guru, the teacher. After Indra and Virocana live as ascetics in his household and serve him for thirty-two years, Prajapati gives them an answer. The self, he tells them, is what appears in the reflection in a mirror. Virocana is satisfied with the answer. He returns to the asuras pleased, convinced that the external body is the self, and remains, in fact, in ignorance. Indra, by contrast, cannot rest content with what he has heard. On his way back, Indra begins to see the problem. If the reflected body is the self, then when the body becomes blind, lame, or crippled, so does the self; and when the body dies, the self must die as well. He sees nothing worthwhile in this and returns to his teacher. Prajapati gives him another answer. Indra accepts it, sets out once more, again begins to doubt, and again returns.

The dance between them repeats itself time and again. Indra is not a good student because he accepts his teacher’s words without question. He is a good student precisely because he cannot rest content with an answer that fails the test of his own thought and experience. Prajapati, for his part, is not merely a source of the correct answer. He creates a process in which the student must discover why each partial answer is insufficient. And so, only after 101 years of living alongside Prajapati, of service, inquiry, doubt, departure, and return, does Indra receive the secret and highest [knowledge](#) of the self. Why 101 years? Perhaps because it is slightly more than the span of a human life. Perhaps because the Upanisad is telling us that there are no shortcuts. Perhaps because the final truth can be stated in a single sentence, yet it may take a lifetime of living with a teacher and living with that knowledge before we can truly embody it. Learning emerges through a web of relationships and experiences such as bodily sensations, memories, desire,

embarrassment, and confusion; even through the weather and the food we share. We can receive the mahavakya within seconds. But Indra had to become someone capable of truly knowing it. Ancient Indian traditions add another element to this process: tapas. The term tapas is often translated as asceticism, but its literal meaning is connected to heat. It refers to the inner heat generated through austere spiritual practices, a heat often imagined as a kind of inner fire. Different traditions across the subcontinent developed a wide range of tapas practices: meditation, fasting, silence, prolonged standing, sitting motionless, and exposure to harsh conditions. Fire transforms everything it touches. It cooks, melts, hardens, breaks down, and changes states of matter.

Tapas, too, is understood as a force of transformation. It is the inner heat through which knowledge becomes embodied and begins to transform the practitioner. We can carry this idea beyond the world of asceticism. Anyone who has written a book, carried out academic research, or struggled to understand a difficult text knows this heat. It appears as frustration, effort, concentration, repetition, rewriting, and questions that do not yield an immediate answer. Learning and creation can be painful. They require us to sweat. That sweat is part of the path. Here I return to the original question: Can AI replace a guru? Can it replace a teacher? I do not think that is the right question. The more urgent one is: What kind of students is AI creating? Human beings are naturally drawn to shortcuts, and AI has arrived as our perfect accomplice. We are all a little lazy. Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune, has a twin sister: Alakshmi, associated with disorder, fatigue, misfortune, and laziness. Alakshmi lives in all of us to some degree. She is the part of us that wants to spend hours watching Netflix, sink into passive scrolling, and avoid, whenever possible, the slow and painful work of reading an academic article from beginning to end.

We are all a little like Virocana too, happy to passively receive the answer to an exam, the central argument of a book, or the bottom line of an article, and move on. At every turn, another shortcut presents itself. I am not opposed to artificial intelligence. Quite the opposite. It has profound egalitarian potential: it can make knowledge, languages, texts, [teaching](#), and feedback accessible to those who lack access to a good teacher, a library, or a supportive academic environment. In this sense, it can be a powerful aid. But it cannot truly take on the role of Prajapati, who draws us into deeper inquiry. Nor can it decide for us whether we become Indra or Virocana. We can take the first answer AI gives us and move on. Or we can return, question it, and preserve our own experience of reading and writing.

AI can provide answers, but it cannot create the journey through which knowledge becomes transformative. Indra learned because he remained committed to the process and kept going through doubt and frustration. The responsibility does not rest with students alone. If universities reward speed and polished outcomes, students will use AI to produce them. To cultivate curiosity and intellectual independence, we must create learning processes that demand more. As the academic year begins, the question is twofold: are students still willing to walk the path, and are universities willing to reshape themselves around the kind of learning that makes such a path possible?

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