Knowledge and Realization

An Exploration in the Age of AI and Beyond

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence can expand what humanity knows without making personal understanding obsolete. The pursuit of understanding is part of our nature and remains worthwhile even when an answer is already known. Drawing upon four earlier papers and a Vaiṣṇava understanding of the jīva, I distinguish intellectual accomplishment from personal understanding and spiritual realization. AI can assist these pursuits; it cannot undertake them on our behalf. I also defend the theses that life comes from life and consciousness comes from consciousness: neither chemical organization nor computational sophistication can produce the conscious self. These convictions frame an invitation to examine how knowledge becomes personally understood and, in spiritual practice, realized in the way we live—and ultimately, die.

1. What survives the answer

If a machine can answer the questions that once distinguished us, what remains of our distinction? The prospect of losing a livelihood or a meaningful vocation deserves serious attention, but let us go further. The uneasiness surrounding artificial intelligence also touches the stories through which we have made ourselves important. Someone who has spent a lifetime becoming an authority may welcome the expansion of knowledge and still resent the disappearance of its exclusivity. Before attributing such attachment to others, we should examine our own attachment to intellectual status.

I have always welcomed emerging technologies and encouraged my students to become conversant with them. I used ChatGPT to help consolidate and expand the ideas of the four papers that led to this article. I wrote those papers between 2006 and 2014, before the advent of publicly or commercially available LLMs. There is no contradiction here. An instrument can help me articulate a conviction without having the conviction, just as it can help me examine a spiritual teaching without undergoing its realization. By realization I mean more than accepting an explanation: I mean a truth becoming directly apprehended and assimilated in one's life. In the spiritual sense developed here, it concerns the conscious self and its relationship with the Divine.

In 2006, my exploration of Kurt Gödel's rational theology brought my mathematical training into conversation with my spiritual inclinations. I wanted to ask what rationality could establish about the Divine without assuming that intellectual rigor required religious disbelief (Rosario 2006).

The following year, I deliberately parodied an ontological argument. I introduced theological difficulties, including the origin and existence of evil, that undermined the construction from the outset, and proceeded anyway. The apparent change of direction was intentional. The epilogue located the work's spiritual significance in the service that inspired it, rather than in the formal conclusion (Rosario 2007). A valid deduction, even when available, may be an invitation to a relationship with God but does not itself constitute that relationship. One may construct an argument about a relationship without entering—and eventually relishing—that relationship.

By 2008, I was asking how spiritual knowledge is acquired and what qualifies someone to receive it. I proposed examining its fruits in humility, compassion, truthfulness, and forgiveness. Mathematical accomplishment was no prerequisite (Rosario 2008). In 2014, I returned to the scientific investigation of life, consciousness, and death. I maintain the positions advanced there concerning the impossibility of producing life from nonliving matter or consciousness through an algorithm (Rosario 2014). I return below to what would count against those convictions and what their refutation would mean for me.

Across these inquiries, one distinction has become more urgent: obtaining an answer is not the same as understanding it, and understanding a spiritual teaching is not the same as realizing it. Understanding is worthwhile in itself; a mathematical insight need not change our conduct to deserve pursuit. Spiritual inquiry asks the further question of how what we understand enters the life we actually lead.

2. Knowledge without the pedestal

Public information is not necessarily accessible knowledge. A mathematical paper may be available to everyone and intelligible to almost no one. When AI explains unfamiliar concepts, responds to confusion, and helps people apply them, it can lower the threshold of participation. Its promise extends beyond finding information to helping people work with knowledge.

One concrete example is Claude's reported nine-loop scattering-amplitude calculation in a simplified theoretical physics model. Matt von Hippel describes substantial work using established methods, checked by Lance Dixon, at an estimated end-user cost of $1,000–$2,000 per approach (von Hippel 2026). A new result need not require a new method to advance knowledge. Such accomplishment deserves recognition without being taken as proof of subjective experience.

This is the democratization I welcome. It lowers some barriers without making intelligence, resources, or access equal: access differs, errors persist, and prior understanding still shapes the quality of a question. Nevertheless, authority changes when outsiders can undertake work once dependent upon years of specialist preparation. Expertise may continue to deserve respect while losing some of its power to exclude.

The democratization of knowledge becomes unsettling when we discover that we valued being above others as much as we valued knowing. That is a claim about a temptation, not a diagnosis of every specialist. Concerns about reliability, responsibility, and the loss of meaningful work deserve a serious hearing. Jacob Tsimerman's interview with Curt Jaimungal brings the personal cost into view: an anticipated expansion of mathematical capability can coexist with grief over a familiar way of pursuing mathematics (Jaimungal 2026).

Mathematicians may rightly describe themselves as seekers of truth. Their inquiry can evoke wonder and devotion. But truth does not become less true because someone else, or an instrument, reaches it first. One possible loss is our claim to exclusive achievement. In some cases, the pain may reveal how closely the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of distinction have become entwined. Concerns that discoveries may outpace human understanding deserves a different response: wanting to understand results is entirely compatible with wanting more discoveries.

As an educator, I see another possibility. A child's discovery is not spoiled because the teacher already knows the answer. The discovery still belongs to the learner. A theorem known for centuries can awaken a mind today. If we reserve the joy of understanding for those who arrive first, we make nearly everyone a spectator. AI invites us to recover learning as participation rather than admission to an intellectual aristocracy. The human need to understand does not expire when another intellect supplies the answer. Otherwise, teaching itself would lose its purpose.

3. There is no jīva in an LLM

A proof, an understanding of a proof, and the experience of understanding are distinguishable. Mathematical justification is public and communal. Tsimerman acknowledges that he does not understand every step in the proofs of some of his own theorems from first principles: he relies on accepted results whose proofs he does not know and whose main ideas he does not always know. He distinguishes these dependencies from the contributions he understands very deeply (Jaimungal 2026, 20:47–23:18). This is no confession that mathematics has become unjustified. No individual carries the whole discipline within a single mind.

AI may extend that division of intellectual labor. We should demand inspectable justification and explanations that deepen understanding. Tao's proposal to use AI for explanation and exploration offers one constructive direction (Tao 2026). Neither the human nor the artificial origin of an argument exempts it from examination.

Consciousness requires a separate inquiry. Butlin and colleagues assess AI through indicators derived from several neuroscientific theories. Their 2023 conclusion is explicit: "Our analysis suggests that no current AI systems are conscious" (Butlin et al. 2023). Here "current" refers to the systems considered then. The authors also see no obvious technical obstacle to future systems satisfying their proposed indicators. Their report supports skepticism about the consciousness of the systems assessed; it does not prove that artificial consciousness is forever impossible.

My position goes further. In the Vaiṣṇava account I accept, the jīva is the conscious living self—the soul or spirit soul—whose existence precedes the body and continues after physical death. The body does not produce the jīva, nor does its destruction extinguish it. Consciousness belongs to this enduring subject and is irreducible to material operations; intellectual performance is something a subject or an instrument may exhibit. There is no jīva in an LLM. Its capacity to compose a moving account of suffering does not make it a sufferer. Its account of surrender is not an act of surrender.

"Life comes from life": this is the thesis championed by Dr. T. D. Singh, Bhakti Svarūpa Dāmodara Swami, in his introduction to Prabhupāda's *Life Comes from Life* (Singh n.d.). For the present inquiry, I add: "Consciousness comes from consciousness." I maintain that no combination of wholly nonliving chemical materials can produce life, and no refinement of an algorithm can produce consciousness. Sophisticated biochemical manipulation and computational superiority remain operations upon material arrangements; in my account, neither can originate the living, conscious self.

These are claims about nature, not merely descriptions of what technology has yet to accomplish. I reject the materialist accounts, often advanced in support of atheism, that treat life and consciousness as products of nonliving, nonconscious matter alone. The distinction is between

originating life or subjective experience and modifying an existing living system or reproducing the outward signs of experience. My objection is to the proposed material origin, not to the usefulness of biochemical research or computation.

I must nevertheless remain open to evidence that these theses are wrong. If life and consciousness were demonstrably produced from wholly nonliving, nonconscious matter alone, I would regard that finding as fatal to the theological position I defend. I would then accept the materialist account I oppose, including its conclusion that consciousness terminates at death. That is the philosophical consequence I would draw, although the demonstration alone would not logically establish that conclusion or disprove every possible conception of God. My position rests on the irreducibility of the living, conscious self as indispensable to spiritual existence.

This is my philosophical and theological position. A reader who believes that an appropriately organized computation can itself have experience will dispute it. A convincing description of suffering does not, by itself, establish that the system experiences suffering. That distinction explains why greater eloquence or problem-solving ability does not settle the question of consciousness.

My conviction is that an LLM does not experience spiritual realization. It can generate language that helps a human being realize something, perhaps language nobody has previously written. The experience belongs to the person awakened by it. A book can awaken a reader without itself awakening. Novelty does not erase that distinction.

4. The learner cannot be replaced

Teaching makes this personal. I can explain an idea, choose an example, and correct a mistake. I cannot understand on the student's behalf. The answer can be given; the act of understanding must occur in the learner. Unnecessary struggle is no virtue, but neither is possession of an answer evidence that learning has occurred.

Spiritual instruction exposes an even more uncomfortable possibility. We may understand the argument and remain unwilling to live by it. The person who explains humility brilliantly may still experience correction as an insult. The scholar of compassion may remain indifferent to the person interrupting his work. Sometimes what prevents realization is not a missing explanation. It is the price we refuse to pay for what we already understand.

We must become receptive to truth even when it threatens our preferred account of ourselves. I call this a "softening of the heart," akin to Mahāprabhu's *ceto-darpaṇa-mārjanam*, the cleansing of the mirror of the heart. Such receptivity requires humility and discernment. A teacher's demand for obedience does not establish spiritual authority; sincere questions must remain welcome, and conduct must remain open to examination. A relationship that shields the teacher from every question may cultivate compliance while leaving the heart untouched.

AI can make teachings more approachable and questions more precise. But an eloquent spiritual answer, whether produced by a person or a machine, should not be mistaken for the life it describes. The danger is familiar: we learn to speak as though we have arrived and cease to notice that we have not begun.

5. The truth that asks something of us

Spiritual realization concerns the conscious self and its relationship to ultimate reality. In my tradition, it culminates in a realized relationship with the Supreme Person. The human body and mind enable the jīva's spiritual practice and expression; they do not originate the soul or exhaust its nature. To know who I am therefore requires more than acquiring a persuasive description of myself. The ancient injunction "Know thyself," associated with Socrates, remains perennially relevant: no account of the self can substitute for self-realization.

Everyone knows that death is certain. Very few of us live as though we have understood it. We postpone reconciliation, defend grievances, and organize our lives around possessions we cannot retain. The proposition has entered the intellect while leaving much of our life untouched. The question is not whether we can repeat that we will die. It is what that knowledge asks us to relinquish while we are alive.

Likewise, I may acknowledge another person's dignity and violate it when angry. I may praise detachment while depending upon admiration. The distance between what I profess and what I protect is a place to begin spiritual inquiry. Realization becomes demanding when fidelity to an insight costs comfort, pride, or advantage. What I defend when challenged can reveal more than what I affirm when untroubled.

The Bhagavad-gītā connects learning with praṇipāta, a humble approach; paripraśna, inquiry; and sevā, service. Its teachers are tattva-darśinaḥ, those who have seen truth (4.34). Prabhupāda's commentary joins inquiry to submission and rejects blind following. The seeker participates in a relationship through which knowledge becomes personally consequential (Prabhupāda, Bhagavad-gītā 4.34).

Service matters because even spiritual study can become a form of acquisition. I can accumulate teachings as I accumulate credentials, enlarging the very identity I claim to transcend. I have witnessed this often in others and recognized it, uncomfortably, in myself. Serving another challenges the assumption that everything exists for my advancement. Inquiry examines what I believe; service reveals what I am willing to give—and whether I can give without making myself the center. Neither guarantees realization, but together they can keep spiritual knowledge from becoming another possession of the ego.

Humility here is a willingness to be changed by truth. It is compatible with rigorous questions and incompatible with the assumption that intelligence makes me spiritually entitled. The capacity to defeat an opponent in argument does not establish the capacity to love. One may win a debate about forgiveness and remain a prisoner of resentment.

These are not tests that prove every theological claim. Compassion and integrity provide evidence about a practitioner's life without demonstrating a complete metaphysics. Yet they keep spiritual inquiry answerable to something beyond verbal accomplishment. If my account of transcendence leaves my cruelty undisturbed, I have reason to question what I have realized.

A reader need not accept my theology to face the discrepancy between conviction and conduct. Different traditions need not be collapsed into one, nor must a humanist adopt a religious vocabulary. The invitation is personal: examine the truth you claim to cherish and ask what in your

life has become different because of it. A thousand years from now, the question will remain intelligible even if the instruments through which we encounter it have become unrecognizable.

6. Assistance without substitution

AI can assist with translation, comparison, and explanation. It can help a hesitant reader enter a difficult text or prepare a question for a teacher. I welcome these possibilities. Its errors require scrutiny, and its output inherits limitations from human sources and design. AI can present conflicting teachings or interpretations as though they agree. Consulting the sources and qualified teachers remains necessary.

The decisive limit is participation. AI can compose an apology; I must acknowledge the wrong and repair it. It can describe devotion; I must enter the relationship. It can organize a discipline; I must practice. Another human being cannot perform these acts for me either. Even someone who disputes my position on artificial consciousness must confront this: whatever experience another being possesses, it cannot undergo my realization on my behalf.

Spiritual life must not become a consolation prize for losing an intellectual competition. Its worth never depended upon human beings outperforming every instrument. The existence of a Ramanujan or a von Neumann never made the rest of us less human or our understanding less worthwhile. Nor does greater intelligence absolve us of the responsibility to ask who we are, where we come from, and what death means. A machine's greater ability would leave those questions personally urgent. The erosion of intellectual superiority may even help expose how little superiority had told us about the self.

7. Beyond the equalizer

A familiar saying invokes the revolver: "God created men, but Sam Colt made them equal." The wording and attribution vary; its provocation is the power of an instrument to unsettle an advantage. I adapted it: "God made some people brilliant and others less so, but AI made them equal." The provocation concerns access to intellectual capability, not literal equality in brilliance or understanding. An instrument can alter the advantages of specialist training without abolishing differences among its users.

Spiritual realization asks what we will do as access to knowledge becomes less exclusive. Brilliance was never sufficient. A religious label cannot confer realization, and a university cannot award it. Neither the learned nor the unlettered can evade the demand to live what they claim to understand.

I welcome the instrument that makes knowledge more accessible. I also welcome the discomfort that asks why I wanted knowledge in the first place. If I wanted it to stand above others, democratization is a threat. If I wanted it to serve and understand, a wider invitation is cause for hope.

Yet access to a teaching cannot substitute for the seeker's response to it. An explanation of forgiveness leaves me responsible for forgiving; a description of devotion leaves me responsible for practice and relationship. The human pursuit of understanding remains worthwhile, however far other intellects advance. What matters personally is what we come to understand, how we live with others, and whether the truths we profess become realized in our lives—and perhaps continue to influence those we leave behind after our death.

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