

# **AYIN**

**On Understanding 'NOTHINGNESS'**

**Throwing light on the meaning of  
Samadhi in Raja Yoga through the  
teachings of the Jewish Mystical  
tradition**

By Bill Heilbronn

A study paper for use when discussing the  
significance of Samadhi.

Written from a Jewish viewpoint

# “At the Cradle of Science and Religion lies Mystery”

Attributed to Albert Einstein – Jewish Physicist and Mathematician

## ***Introduction***

My involvement in Yoga was precipitated by a mid-life crisis that was both physical and psycho-spiritual.

This led me into taking up Hatha Yoga for my physical problems. Inevitably, I began to study the Yoga spiritual texts, in particular the Bhagavad Gita. I found that they had much to say that helped me in dealing with the spiritual crisis of meaning into which I had been plunged. Inevitably, this challenged me to start wondering if there were counterparts to Yoga within my own Jewish tradition. My subsequent explorations led me to a detailed study of Kabbalah and Chassidus, the disciplines that were at the heart of the Jewish mystical tradition.

In this study paper, I endeavour to demonstrate how my studies threw light for me on Samadhi, one of the most difficult to grasp concepts in Raja Yoga, and at the same time showed how close mystical thinking and modern physics are becoming.

It should be appreciated that Jewish mysticism is Panentheistic in its nature. That is, it states that God is in everything (Nature), and that everything (Nature) is in God. From the scientific point of view, “Nature” includes the physicists “Big Bang” theory about the creation of the universe.

## ***How to know God***

One of the most popular introductions to the Yoga Sutras of Sri Patanjali has been through the book “How to know God” by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. The very title of the book in itself challenged and stimulated me to reflect upon a whole range of questions, for how can one ‘KNOW the Unknowable’. So we have to ask:

- What do we mean by **KNOW**?
- What do we mean by **GOD**?
- What is the difference between **KNOWLEDGE** and **BELIEF**?
- What is the **REAL IMPORTANCE** of **NOTHING**?

## ***What do we mean by Know?***

The word ‘Know’ can be interpreted in two ways:

Firstly - in the everyday sense - ‘knowing facts’. If we say that we know someone, we mean that we know their name, their appearance, their place in the world of work and relationships. In this sense ‘knowledge’ is what, for example, the taxi driver must acquire before he receives his licence to ply for hire on the streets of London.

Secondly - in the Biblical sense of a Man knowing his Wife in the sacred union of sex where, in true love, the one penetrates into the other and they become as one. Biblical literature uses this as an allusion to the ultimate mystical relationship of a human being becoming so much in love with God as to become as one with the Holy One. ‘The Song of Songs of Solomon’ is the supreme example of this allegory. When

the Rabbis debated which books should be part of the Biblical canon, the puritanically inclined were opposed to the inclusion of this book because of its sexual allegories, but the saintly Rabbi Akiba insisted that it be included as he considered it to be the holiest of all the books because of those very allusions. It has been a rich source of inspiration to the Kabbalists in their search for the Holy One.

## ***What do we mean by GOD***

There is a very searching question asked by religious thinkers: Is God an entity with attributes? Or is God pure transcendental 'Being-ness', the source of evolutionary consciousness? Or is God the pure potential of 'Nothingness', the spiritual counterpart of the 'Singularity of the cosmic scientist? Or is God the totality of 'Everythingness'? Or is God all of these at once?

If God is an entity, then the Name of God is a noun. If God is 'Being-ness', then the Name of God is a verb. In the vast majority of religions, God is perceived as an entity with attributes and given a Name, whether it is one of the Pantheon of Graeco-Roman or Norse gods, the Vedic Deities, Ahurah Mazda, Allah, or the Jehovah of the King James translation of the Christian Old Testament.

In Judaism in general and Jewish Kabbalah in particular, God is both a Name that is a noun, and the Name that is a verb. In the Creation story that is at the beginning of Genesis, God is the pure potential of **AYIN** – Nothingness, which will be discussed in depth later. In the early history of the Hebrew Bible, Abraham knew God as a noun, an entity - **EL SHADDAI** – 'The Nurturing God'. But later, to Moses, the understanding of the utterly transcendent nature of God was revealed as the Holy One whose "Names" are not nouns but constructs of the verb 'To be': Firstly at the episode of the "Bush that burnt but was not consumed" - **EHYeH ASheR EHYeH** (translated as "I am as I shall be"), and later as the unpronounceable **YHVH**, (a contraction of "**HaYaH, HoVeH, YiHYeH**" meaning "Was, Is, Will be" and best translated as "the Eternal One"). Then, two thousand years ago, the Rabbis turned again to a noun to describe the immanent nature of God as the feminine **SHEKHINA**, meaning the Presence of the Divine Indwelling in the life of Mankind.

The medieval Jewish philosopher, Yehudah Halevi, expressed the mystical yearning for God in a beautiful poem:

"Oh my God where shall I find You, Your place is hidden  
and beyond our comprehension.

And yet Oh my God, where shall I not find you, the whole  
World is full of the Presence of your Glory".

## ***Believing, Faith and Knowing***

There is a distinction between believing in God, whether academically or existentially, and in knowing God. The former is an intellectual assent based on the acceptance of the model put forward by one's tradition and community. It may be coupled with an intuitive understanding of the symbols mediated to us in meditation.

**Faith** is even more important than belief, for it is **the Courage of Uncertainty**. – the humility and willingness to accept that we do not know all the answers, and that all our beliefs are based on provisional models of Reality, but to trust that there is ultimately 'Meaning' in our lives, however much we may be buffeted.

**Knowing** lies much deeper even than the intuitive assent to **Belief**. It is achieved, without reference to models, through that deepest of all forms of meditation in which one enters the interior silence of total emptiness and Nothingness – **AyiN** so that afterwards one can return and understand **YeSh** –the totality of Everythingness.

## ***The Dimensions of Spiritual Being***

We live in a multi-dimensional universe. The dimensions to which we are accustomed are the three of space and that of time. These are the dimensions of **YeSh** – “Everythingness” - in which we have our natural being. Beyond these are two more: those of Infinity, which is endlessness, and of Eternity, which is timelessness. Finally there is that of Nothingness, which in Hebrew is called **AyiN**. If Infinity and Eternity are difficult enough to grasp intellectually, that of ‘Nothingness’ demands the deepest meditation to fully comprehend.

## ***The Act of Creation – the Scientific View***

The astronomers' concept of the “Big Bang”, that is now generally accepted, evolved during the second half of the last century out of the increasingly clear evidence of the “Expanding Universe”. It describes how, at one particular moment, all the potential matter and energy of the Universe was compacted into one infinitely tiny and dense point that was timeless, and occupied no space. This is what scientists called the ‘Singularity’. In that instant, known as Creation, both space and time were born and the ‘Singularity’ transformed its non-dimensional form into a multiplicity of dimensions to create the energy and matter of our Universe. The question “What was before this event?” is meaningless, for Creation marked the actual beginning of time (as well as space), a dimension that came into existence only with the metamorphosis of the ‘Singularity’.

The ancient Kabbalist book in the Jewish Mystical tradition - ‘Sepher ha Zohar’ - puts it thus:

Beyond that point, nothing is known  
So it is called Beginning

It is of interest that Rabbi Isaac of Acco, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, pointed out that the seven days of creation were not days as we understand them, but “Divine Days”. According to his calculation, the Universe was created 15,340,500,000 years ago. (See page 186 of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s seminal work on the Sefer Yetzirah for a detailed analysis). It is amazing that this eight hundred year old calculation should be within twelve per cent of the very recent scientific estimates of approximately 13.7 billion years.

There is an extended version of this theory that also fits the evidence of the ‘expanding universe’. This suggests that the expansion will eventually end and will be followed by a contraction that will finally terminate in the ‘Big Crunch’ where all the space, time, energy and matter of the Universe will be concentrated into an infinitely small ‘Black Hole’. This will become the new ‘Singularity’ that will give birth to the next act of Creation.

Both the Hindu Scriptures and the Kabbalah contain quotations that suggest a similar conclusion – an eternally continuing Creation and Destruction of Universes. The reader who wishes to explore further is recommended to Chapter 10 of Richard Friedman’s book – The Hidden Face of God, published by Harper and Collins ISBN 0-06-0622-58.

## ***The Act of Creation – the Kabbalist View***

When we open the Hebrew Bible and study Genesis Chapter 1: verse 3, we read:

“And God said: “Let there be Light”, and there was Light”.

And in the Sepher ha Zohar (the sacred book of the Kabbalists) we read:

“With the appearance of the Light, the Universe expanded.  
With its concealment, all individual existence came into being  
This is the mystery of the act of Creation.  
One who understands, will understand”.

It is interesting to compare the first verse of Genesis with the mathematical theories of Einstein and the observations of astronomers such as Hoyle. The English translations of the text – **Be:reshit B:ra Elohim** - generally read:

“In the Beginning, **God** created .....

However the Hebrew original, - **B:reshit B:rah Elohim** – if translated accurately word by word, reads

“In Beginning created **Elohim** .....

and this, to the Kabbalists, makes **Elohim** the object of creation and not, as interpreted in the usual translation, the subject. The subject is inferred. We shall return to this in a moment.

The Hebrew word for ‘God’ is **EI**. The word ‘**Elohim**’ is its plural feminine form. **EI** is never used alone but always with a pronoun or an adjective following it, for example: ‘**Elohenu**’ – our God, or ‘**EI Rachamim**’ – ‘Compassionate God’ or ‘**EI Shaddai**’ – Nurturing God. It must be understood that the use of the word **Elohim** does not mean that the Hebrews were polytheistic and worshipped Gods as such, or that **EI** was the name of God, but rather that the **Elohim** were the attributes of God manifested in the Universe as the archetypal forms and forces, akin to Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in the Hindu tradition.

What then was the subject? The missing word has been interpreted according to the mystical tradition and led the Kabbalists to suggest that the subject is the hidden and utterly unknowable Nothingness of **AYiN**, and that the real meaning is:

“In Beginning, the Unknowable and utterly Transcendental One - **AyiN** - created those emanations from itself that were the archetypes for the Universe”.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Yitchak Luria of Safed postulated a theory that in modern terminology might be expressed as follows:

“In the Beginning, there was nothing but the Emptiness of the void, and within it, the brooding superconsciousness of **AYiN** stirred and gave rise to **Eyn Sof** - without end - the dimension of God's infinite being, and to **Eyn Sof Aur** - limitless light - the dimension of God's eternity. There was no universe - only the potential for creation. And the creative urge arose in the Consciousness of God and there was a contraction - **Tzimtzum** -

of the Infinity and Eternity of God into itself in order to make room for the Universe. From out of that contraction, the act of creation was manifest as the 'Big Bang' in which Eternity gave birth to Time, and Infinity gave birth to Space, the universe came into existence and the Holy One manifested HIS/HER Presence in it”.

Unlike material science, which denies any connection between the three dimensions of Thought and the other dimensions of Time, Space, Matter and Energy, the spiritual sciences, including Kabbalah, Sufism and Yoga, equate the seven and regard thought as the primary element. Thus **AYiN** is not only the unconscious and primary thought within the absolute nothingness of undifferentiated being, but also the origin of the ‘Singularity’ revealed by the astronomers. For thought, as a manifestation of consciousness, is the primary source of energy. The Panentheist doctrine tells us that God is in the Singularity of the cosmic scientist, and that the Singularity is in God.

However, God is not only “**AYiN**”, the Absolute Nothing or emptiness manifested as the Primordial Superconsciousness underlying the Universe, but also is that which, manifested through the **Elohim**, enters and becomes involved in the life of Humankind, through the attributes of Loving Mercy, Discerning Judgement and Compassion. Most importantly God is manifested as the **Shekinah** – the Holy Indwelling that is God’s Presence in the life of Humankind and in **YeSh**, which is God manifested as the ‘Everythingness’ of Nature.

**AYiN – Nothing** - stands in opposition to and yet in partnership with **YeSh – Everything**. (In nuclear physics we have similar relationships such as that of ‘dark matter’ and ‘matter’). When we go searching for God there is a similar dichotomy. In the act of Creation it has a very special meaning as will be shown.

## ***I am Nothing – A Story***

Two thousand years ago, in the Talmud – the commentaries on the Bible – the Rabbis described and used the four-fold progressive interpretation technique known by the acronym **PaRDeS**:

- **P - Peshat** – Plain - The literal, for children and those of limited understanding. It is sad that the atheists tend to see no further than this and base their rejection of religious belief on the assumption that this is the only level. The religious fundamentalists and Creationists make the same error.
- **R - Remez** – Allusion - The allegorical explanation, for the more mature who can understand that the stories have a deeper meaning than the literal.
- **D - Derash** – Exposition. The homilectical commentary for those of more advanced intellect who can understand that the stories reveal a spiritual and ethical message.
- **S - Sod** – Secret. The mystical teaching for those whose spirituality has a strong intuitive element to balance and enhance their intellect. This is the province of authentic Kabbalah and Chassidus.

There is a humorous tale about a cleric and his assistant reciting a chant in preparation for the service of worship, repeating continuously as a mantra – “I am Nothing ----- I am Nothing” The unsophisticated and humble cleaner overhears them, is overwhelmed by the thought and spontaneously joins in. On hearing him, the cleric turning to his assistant and in a superior tone of voice proclaims, “ Who does he think he is, to say that he is 'Nothing'?”

At the first level, this is no more than a literal chronicle of events, without any ethical judgement being made.

At the second level, it becomes an allegory for the self-righteousness to which we are all too prone.

At the third level, it turns to the prior significance of genuine humility in communing with the Holy One.

But what of the fourth level and how can we interpret the story there?

When the mantra is chanted in Hebrew, the mystical significance becomes apparent as shown in the following analysis, for:

Reading from right to left, the Hebrew word for **I** is spelt:



whilst that for **Nothing** is spelt:



Thus **I** becomes **Nothing** by a simple change in order of the second and third letters.

Before we can take the analysis to a conclusion, it is necessary to examine the meaning of **AYiN** and look at the individual letters that form it.

### ***The Letters in Ayin***

The Hebrew letters have more than just phonetic significance. There is a magic to them in the way that they can be manipulated so that two words with the same letters can be associated with each other. Here 'I' and 'Nothing' have precisely the same letters. Let us consider these three letters in turn.





The letter **Aleph** is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It makes no sound but is the taking of breath before a sound is uttered. It is said to be the most humble of letters. Its numerical value is one and it alludes to the ineffable mysteries of the oneness of God. The mystical significance of its construction is analysed below.



The letter **Yod** is the smallest of all the letters, and is therefore a picture of humility. However, in its doubled form - '**Yod Yod**', it is used as an abbreviation for the Name of God. Yod means "arm" or "hand," and its form suggests a hand that is reaching toward heaven.



The letter **Nun** is shown on the left in its normal form in the body of a word.

However, **Nun** is one of the five letters that have a final form that is used to end a word and this is shown on the right.

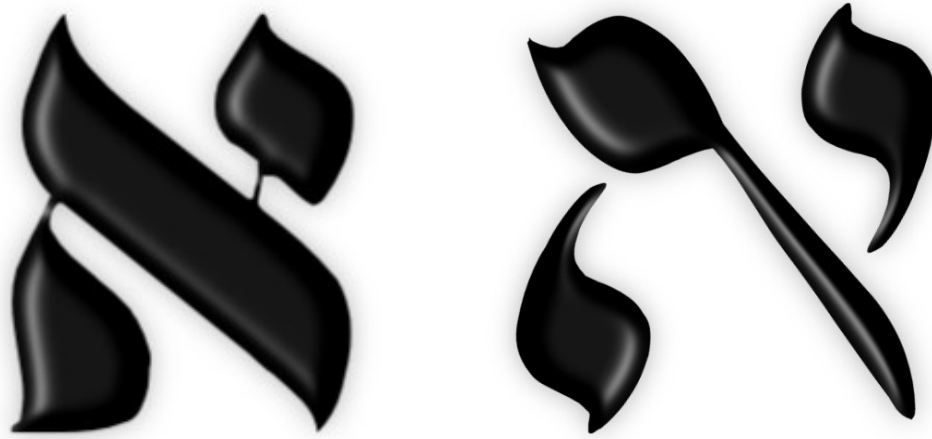


**Nun** is the element of holiness within a person. It has been described as a "Soul-bird". In its normal form, it is bent in humility. But in its final form, it stands upright. According to the sages, **Nun** is said to represent both faithfulness and the reward for faithfulness.



The letter **Vav** is not a part of **AniY** or **AYiN**, but it needs to be introduced as it forms part of the construction of **Aleph** (below) when examining the mystical significance of the latter. It means 'hook' and as such has two essential connective powers: By joining heaven and earth, it implies the connection between spiritual and earthly matters. It alludes also to the creative connection between all of the letters.

The letter **Aleph** is constructed in such a way as to give it an even stronger mystical meaning. Within it can be seen an upper letter **Yod** and a lower letter **Yod** joined by a letter **Vav**. In Kabbalistic literature, the upper Yod represents the hidden aspect of **YHVH**, whereas the lower Yod represents the revelation of **YHVH** to mankind. The **Vav** connects the two realms.



**Vav** (which is also used to denote the number 6) is also thought to represent humanity, since Adam was created on the sixth day. **Vav** is diagonal since it is humbled in the face of God's mystery and His revelation. The two **Yods** also indicate the paradox of understanding God as both utterly transcendent but yet immanent in the world.

### ***The Meaning of AYIN***

To **KNOW** God as distinct from **BELIEVING** in God entails becoming as **AYIN** – Nothingness – in which all thought ceases. It is found amongst the true mystics of all faiths where it is known by a multitude of names such as in Christianity, the Cloud of Unknowing and (in the Orient) Samadhi, Satori, Nirvana etc. it is an experience (or non-experience as it might more accurately be called) that is incommunicable. It is not so much an expansion of consciousness as a total contraction of consciousness that can only be compared with the **AYIN** that was the Nothingness of God at the moment of Creation. It is that point where the mystic knows **AYIN** - God by becoming, for a moment, **AYIN** - God. It is the one experience that is common to the mystics of all Religions, and where all Mystics meet in mutual understanding.

### ***The Mystical Significance of the Story***

The cleaner was uttering the mantra, with his Ego so sublimated in true humility that he could take his stand in his Higher Self, his true 'I' – **ANiY** - totally aware of his personal 'Nothingness' into which he could sink unselfconsciously so that the Higher Nothingness of the Holy One could pervade him.

On the other hand the two clerics were so full of their 'Holier than Thou' egocentricity, that any communion with the true "Nothingness" of the Holy One was completely evading them. So if we are truly to know God, we have to take our stand, as did the humble cleaner, in our Higher Self - **ANiY** – so that we can truly identify with **AYIN** – Nothing.

## ***The Moment of Truth***

**AYiN** can mean Nothingness or Emptiness, and as such stands seemingly in opposition to **YESH** which is Everythingness. However, as the mystics tell us, God is in both, and both are in God.

Jewish belief emphasises that God is continually bringing forth existence from Nothingness. Similarly in meditation, Human consciousness oscillates between a state of Void and one of cognitive consciousness. This produces the condition of “**Bittul**” the temporary negation of ego.

As Rabbi Arthur Green puts it in his book “Your word is fire”:

**“In all change and growth, the mysterious AYiN is present. There is an ungraspable instant in the midst of all transformation when that which is about to be transformed is no longer that which it had been until that moment, but has not yet emerged as its transformed Self. That moment belongs to the AYiN of God. The height of contemplative prayer and meditation is seen as such a transforming moment, but one that is marked by awareness. The worshipper is no longer himself for he is fully absorbed in that moment in the Nothingness of the Holy. In that moment of absorption, it is no longer the worshipper who speaks but rather the Holy Presence who speaks through him. In that return to the Source, the human being has reached his highest state, becoming nothing but the passive instrument for the Divine Word.”**

## ***The Final point in Meditation***

In that deepest of all meditations, we contract into our Selves **AniY**, to become as Nothing and to know Nothing - **AyiN**, before our consciousness expands again into the World of Everything - **YeSh**. For the culmination of the mystic quest in Jewish Kabbalah lies not in the permanent experience of **AYiN** – Pure Nothingness that, however timeless, must only be momentary, but in the return to the World of **YeSh** in which the memory of the awareness of **AYiN** is maintained and treasured.

For, just as the final stage of meditation in the Chinese experience is “Riding the Bull into the Market Place”, the completion of the spiritual experience of **AyiN** lies in bringing the ‘Taste of Heaven’ down into that same ‘Market Place’ to enrich one’s life with meaning and purpose, so as to fulfil actively one’s destiny – **Tikkun Olam**, the repair of a fractured and imperfect World.

The doctrine of Samadhi lies at the heart of Yoga. In Yoga Meditation classes we learn valuable techniques. Those of us who follow Religious traditions other than the Hindu (or Buddhist) can profit also if we examine the deep spiritual philosophies underlying our own faiths, and that are hidden in the teachings of their great Mystics.

In this study paper, I have looked into those that I have found within my own Jewish Faith. I have found there valuable material that throws much light both on the deeper meaning of Samadhi, and also how one might understand what underlies the title – “How to know God” - that Christopher Isherwood and Swami Prabhavananda chose for their own presentation of the Sutras of Patanjali that lie at the heart of Raja Yoga.

I present these as a challenge to my readers to search out the counterparts of Raja Yoga within their own Faith Traditions that will broaden their understanding of Samadhi and, even more important, discover the deep truths in their own belief structure which are so similar to those in people of other spiritual traditions.

Published by:

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