

Nididhyasana as Existential Assimilation: From the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad to Contemporary Philosophical Counselling

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Abstract: This paper explores the classical Advaitic concept of Nididhyasana (deep contemplation), tracing its origins in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad and examining its potential applications in contemporary philosophical counselling. Nididhyasana transcends mere meditation; it entails the profound assimilation of truth, following the stages of Sravana (hearing) and Manana (reflection). The Upanishadic dialogues, particularly those between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, serve as rich templates of experiential teaching that stand the test of time. This paper positions Nididhyasana as a potent tool for existential transformation, particularly in contexts where philosophical clarity and ontological anchoring offer a viable path beyond modern psychological frameworks. Through a comparative and applicative approach, the paper advocates for Nididhyasana as an experiential modality, bridging the gap between metaphysical truth and practical life, and intriguingly shifting the focus from problem-solving to ontological grounding.

Keywords: Nididhyasana, Self-realisation, Meditation, Transformation, Psychological Healing, Philosophical counselling

Introduction: Reclaiming Philosophy as Lived Wisdom

The 21st century is marked by an unprecedented paradox: an abundance of information and a scarcity of wisdom. Amid global crises, social alienation, and existential anxiety, philosophical

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counselling has emerged as a secular alternative to religious and psychological paradigms. However, many such approaches remain at the level of intellectual comfort rather than existential transformation.

Our everyday life is often confined and superficial, with our actions, feelings, and thoughts limited to a narrow and rigid range. This falls short of life's potential fullness and richness. However, the process of philosophical counselling, as a whole, is distinct in that it is centred on self-transformation, echoing the fundamental vision of transformation thinkers. It offers a beacon of hope in a world of intellectual comfort, utilising philosophical methods to guide clients in critically reflecting on the ideas and worldviews that underlie specific existential and practical life problems. As Ran Lahav (1995)¹ states, the goal of philosophical counselling is to help clients understand the narrow, perimetral worldview in which they are imprisoned and inspire them to transcend their mental barriers, thereby enriching and deepening their lives. In Platonic terms, the objective is to comprehend the cave in which we are imprisoned and eventually emerge from it.²

In this milieu, individuals seek not merely to cope but to comprehend, seeking clarity about identity, meaning, suffering, and purpose. These questions are not new. They are perennial, echoing through ancient traditions that viewed life not as a problem to be solved but as a reality to be realised. They are the threads that connect us to our ancestors and one another, weaving a shared human experience. Indian philosophy, especially Advaita Vedanta, stands out in this regard. It offers not just metaphysical speculation, but a rigorous soteriology - a pathway toward liberation through discernment and realisation.

Contemporary counselling often emphasises empathy, active listening, and cognitive restructuring. While effective, these tools primarily operate within the dualistic framework of subject and object, client and issue, and thought and emotion. The Upanishadic model, however, turns inward, not to analyse the contents of thought, but to transcend thought itself. Nididhyasana

² Ran Lahav, *Stepping Out of Plato's Cave* (Loyev Books: USA, 2016).

(deep concentration), as taught in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad³, exemplifies this shift. It is a contemplative act not aimed at conceptual resolution, but at ontological anchoring.

In philosophical counselling, Nididhyasana opens new terrain. Rather than resolving life's dilemmas at the narrative or psychological level, it addresses the root of all suffering: misidentification with the non-Self. It leads not to answers, but to a reconstitution of the questioner. By situating the client in the field of pure awareness - the witness - it completely reframes the problem space. The depth and significance of this reframing cannot be overstated. Why revisit these ancient teachings now? Because modernity, for all its advancement, has not outgrown the need for inner wisdom. The disquiet of the modern individual - alienated, anxious, and rootless - demands not merely coping mechanisms but a profound return to essential being. The Upanishads, especially the Brhadaranyaka, offer tools not just to interpret life but to inhabit it fully. Their teachings are not a luxury, but a necessity in our fast-paced, disconnected world. The urgency and importance of this revival cannot be overstated.

Thus, this paper undertakes the revival of Nididhyasana, not as a historical curiosity, but as a living practice. It seeks to demonstrate that this ancient contemplative practice, when carefully interpreted and applied wisely, can serve as a powerful aid in contemporary philosophical counselling. Preserved in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the Vedantic path to self-enlightenment is a profound and inspiring journey that involves three key processes: Shravana (Listening), Manana (Reflection), and Nididhyasana (Deep Contemplation and Assimilation). These are stages and steppingstones on the path to a deeper understanding of the Self and the Universe. The stage of Shravana involves the jnanendriyas (organs of perception), such as hearing, seeing, and feeling, which are used to receive wisdom. The wisdom of ultimate reality is offered to the student through words, either through a living form, such as a master, teacher, or coach, or through sacred texts. It is the foundation of self-knowledge.

³ Swami Madhavananda, trans., *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, with the Commentary of Shankaracharya, Third Edition (Advaita Ashram, 1950), 2.4.5.

Self-knowledge arises during Shravana, the *systematic study* of Vedanta, where the guru presents teachings as a verbal mirror. If the teachings are presented correctly and the listener has a mind free from defects, the knowledge “I am the Self” arises.

Ears are necessary for listening (Sravana), but they are insufficient. The essential listening component is your presence (of mind) during the act. Being fully present while listening is not just a suggestion; it is necessary. It is a necessity. It ensures that no thought of any kind occurs in the background, and thinking while listening takes attention away from what is being said and directs it inward. You can correctly comprehend what is spoken only when you are entirely available to listen.

This does not mean that you must accept whatever is said without deliberation. It simply means that you're listening right now. In listening, no process of acceptance or non-acceptance is involved. Listening is only listening. Listening correctly to what is being said, deliberate upon it, and then accept or reject it, but not while listening. Right, listening is not just a skill but a catalyst for personal growth and the first steppingstone of the spiritual journey.

The second stage, Manana (reflection), is not just a stage but a profound act of engaging with the teachings of great thinkers. When these words are received, the seeker is supposed to reflect on them actively and genuinely engage with them. The seeker can use 'inner speech', a form of mental dialogue, to reflect on them and engage in conversation with these words of wisdom. This reflection is not a passive process, but an active one that reveals the knowledge packed within these teachings. The mystery of the universe slowly unfolds in the seeker's understanding when they actively contemplate the central theme of the content they reflect on. Thus, the process of using the mind and its instrument to reflect on this wisdom through inner *words* is called manana. Manana involves reflecting on the meanings of these teachings and meditating on them through personal experience. Manana involves reasoning to remove doubts about Vedantic teachings, such as “Brahman is the substratum of the world”⁴ and “Brahman is

⁴ Ibid., 3.14.1.

none other than myself.”⁵ Since doubts belong to the intellect, they are resolved through reasoning.

Contemplation (Manana) is a process of logically reflecting on what has been heard. Logic, a neutral tool, plays a crucial role in this process. It is the rationality of logic that guides us in our contemplation. When logic is used only to find faults, the journey of contemplation is hindered. Logic becomes genuinely beneficial when it is used to seek the truth. Context is crucial to understanding. Many things can only be truly understood within their given context, and when taken out of context, they can be misconstrued. The pursuit of finding faults can never lead to inner growth. Those enthusiastic about their spiritual evolution are not interested in finding faults but in seeking the truth. Thus, those who logically contemplate what was said with the right attitude to determine the nature of the truth reach the third step of Nididhyasan.

Nididhyasana (Deep contemplation) is the third stage, the pinnacle of the spiritual or transformational process. Playing with words to unravel the unknown of the Non-dual Reality will lead the student to a state in which knowing is present without needing words. If the seeker allows it, the words used during contemplation can fall away, leading the seeker to silence—a silence filled with knowing. The seeker can rest in this knowing. This state is known as Nididhyasana. The purpose of Nididhyasana is not to acquire new knowledge but to enjoy the benefits of Self-knowledge. It addresses the gap between knowing the teachings *and experiencing* their promised *benefits*, such as freedom from emotional disturbances.

The Classical Foundations of Nididhyasana

Nididhyasana (deep concentration), in Classical Advaita Vedanta

In the triadic framework of Advaita Vedanta, Nididhyasana is positioned as the culmination of the journey toward Self-realisation. It is preceded by Sravana, the attentive listening to scriptural wisdom, and Manana, the rigorous process of rational

⁵ Ibid., 1.4.10.

contemplation and clarification. While Sravana plants the seed of knowledge and Manana removes doubts, it is Nididhyasana that waters the seed and allows the realisation to take root as lived reality.

Adi Shankaracharya, in his commentaries on the major Upanishads, makes it clear that Nididhyasana is not a passive, repetitive exercise. Instead, it is an active abiding in the vision of oneness, a continuous assertion and recognition of one's true nature as Brahman. It does not entail physical withdrawal from the world, but an inward detachment from identification with the not-Self—body, mind, and phenomena.

The defining feature of Nididhyasana is that it works not through addition but through negation. Its method, echoing the Upanishadic teaching of 'Neti, Neti' (not this, not this), is to discard all false notions of identity until what remains is the unqualified Self. Importantly, this is not a nihilistic void but the ground of Being—pure awareness which illumines all experience without being altered by any of it. In the classical model, the qualifications of the seeker (*adhikari*) are crucial. Nididhyasana is effective only when the seeker has already developed fourfold qualifications: discrimination between real and unreal (*viveka*), dispassion toward ephemeral pleasures (*vairagya*), the sixfold virtues (*shatsampat*), and an intense longing for liberation (*mumukshutva*). Without these, the practice of Nididhyasana (deep concentration) risks becoming either intellectual mimicry or escapist passivity.⁶ Unlike *dhyana* (meditation) in Yoga philosophy, which focuses the mind on a single object, Nididhyasana is an objectless practice. It is not a concentration technique but a contemplative re-identification. One shifts identity from the changing to the changeless, from the doer and experienter to the silent witness. In doing so, the seeker does not merely 'know' the Self but abides as the Self.

The fruits of this practice are described variously in the tradition: freedom from sorrow, abiding bliss (*ananda*), and unshakable peace (*shanti*). More than emotional states, these are ontological realignments. In the realised state, the world continues

⁶ Ibid.

as it is, but the seer no longer mistakes himself to be any of its parts. Actions occur, but the actor is no longer considered the Self.

In philosophical counselling, this understanding offers a shift in therapeutic paradigms. Most therapy aims to stabilise the mind; Nididhyasana, however, transcends the mind. Most methods aim to repair the ego; Nididhyasana, however, dissolves the mistaken identification with the ego altogether. It does not negate psychological healing but places it in a larger framework - one where the highest form of healing is the recognition that there was never anything fundamentally wrong with the Self to begin with. Thus, Nididhyasana represents the Advaitic contribution to contemplative transformation. It is not merely an epistemological act but an ontological revelation. It completes the journey from hearing and reasoning to being—an unshakable resting in the truth that 'I am Brahman.'

From Doctrine to Dialogue: The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad as a Counselling Template

The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, one of the most revered texts in the Vedantic tradition, provides a fertile ground for understanding the experiential dimensions of Self-realisation. It does not simply present doctrines to be believed, but unfolds a pedagogy of transformation, using dialogues, negation, and silence as tools of realisation. Among its many teachings, the dialogues of Yajnavalkya stand out as seminal contributions to the art of contemplative inquiry.

In the dialogue between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi,⁷ the sage articulates a central insight: “It is not for the sake of the husband that the husband is loved, but for the sake of the Self.” This statement initiates a radical inversion of values—one that redirects the search for meaning and fulfilment inward. What begins as a philosophical inquiry into love ultimately evolves into a meditation on the Self. The teaching dismantles object-oriented desire and replaces it with Self-oriented realisation.

⁷ Ibid., 2.4.5.

The method Yajnavalkya employs is not discursive logic alone, but apophatic negation - *Neti, Neti*. In *Brhadaranyaka*,⁸ he declares that the Self is not this, not that; it cannot be grasped, seen, or heard. This deliberate undefinability is not a rhetorical device but an invitation to enter the contemplative space beyond the reach of intellect. The practitioner is encouraged to let go of conceptual fixation and dwell in the substratum of awareness that remains when all objects are negated.

What makes the *Brhadaranyaka* uniquely suitable for philosophical counselling is this structure of dialogue-as-path. The conversations unfold not through abstract speculation but through existential pressure. The interlocutors - Janaka, Maitreyi, and others - are not passive listeners but seekers who push the inquiry to its limits. In counselling, this model provides a framework for structuring sessions as progressive unfoldings, moving from problem to principle, and from identity to awareness.

Moreover, the *Upanishad* refuses to finalise its teachings in any doctrinal form. Its culmination is often in silence, in moments where the questioner dissolves and the questions stop. For example, in the confrontation between Yajnavalkya and Janaka, the climax is not a metaphysical treatise but the king's silent acknowledgement of the truth. This gesture, of no longer needing an answer, is the essence of *Nididhyasana*. It is not the acquisition of truth but the abiding in it.

The *Brhadaranyaka* thus offers more than wisdom literature - it provides a living pedagogy. It exemplifies how philosophical dialogue, when infused with contemplative depth, becomes a vehicle for transformation. In modern terms, it can be seen as a proto-counselling manual, one that encourages the practitioner not to resolve the ego but to see through it. Through its use of paradox, negation, and lived inquiry, *Nididhyasana* becomes not merely a postscript to realisation, but the path itself.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.5.15.

Mapping Nididhyasana to the Praxis of Philosophical Counselling

Integrating *Nididhyasana* into contemporary philosophical counselling requires a reframing of both the therapeutic relationship and the aims of the process. Unlike conventional models that focus on problem-solving, emotional catharsis, or behavioural correction, the inclusion of *Nididhyasana* shifts the orientation toward existential clarification through ontological grounding.

Philosophical counselling is rooted in the Socratic method, where questioning leads to insight and personal autonomy. Similarly, *Nididhyasana* is aimed not at refining beliefs, but at loosening the grip of identity structures altogether. The counsellor thus moves from the role of an analyst or mentor to that of a mirror, gently but persistently pointing the client towards witnessing the Self. *Nididhyasana* begins with an ontological invitation: to question the foundations of one's identity. In a session, this may manifest through exploring the nature of the "I" in statements such as "I am anxious," "I am lost," or "I am not enough." Through contemplative dialogue, the counsellor may ask: Who is this 'I'? The goal is not to dismiss emotions, but to place them in the field of awareness without reducing the self to them. In mapping *Nididhyasana* to philosophical counselling, the stages of *Deconstruction*, *Redirection*, and *Stabilisation* offer a practical trajectory. Each phase is not merely a technique but an intellectual movement—away from conceptual entanglement and toward clarity of being.

Deconstruction, drawing on Derrida's insights, is the process of unravelling one's assumptions, the structures of one's worldview. These hidden beliefs, unique to each individual, shape their sufferings, their identity, and their life's purpose and meaning. The goal of this process is to foster personal growth and self-awareness, creating space for alternative interpretation and deeper understanding of oneself.

Redirection follows not as a tactical reframing but as a reconstitution of the self—from constructed identity to witness-consciousness. This involves a realignment with values, not as imposed moral codes, but as natural expressions of the deeper Self.

It's about choosing new ways of thinking, relating, and being. In this process, the counsellor helps the counselee clarify his values and overcome his old limiting beliefs, and also allows him to evolve through relationships. At this stage, the counsellor uses some metaphysical or ethical frameworks in guiding new directions. The primary purpose or goal of the Redirection process is to empower the client to move from insight to intentional living—aligning thought, emotion, and action with chosen values. This alignment is crucial as it makes the client feel more connected and purposeful.

Stabilisation, finally, is not the maintenance of change but the cultivation of philosophical integrity. Practices such as journaling or contemplative dialogue are not merely supportive tools, but what Foucault terms⁹ *technologies of the self*—vehicles of inward formation. Understood this way, *Nididhyasana* is not a method but a modality of contemplation where epistemic clarity fuses with existential embodiment. It marks not the conclusion of therapy but the beginning of philosophical life.

⁹ Michel Foucault (1926-1984) used the term 'technologies of the self' to underscore the active role individuals play in their own self-creation. These are the practices individuals employ to shape their own identities, behaviours, and moral character. These practices or techniques, often learned and internalised, act as 'vehicles of inward formation.' By these techniques, they move forward toward specific modes of being and self-understanding. Essentially, they are the methods by which individuals cultivate. Examples of these 'technologies of the self' include meditation, journaling, self-reflection, and even certain forms of physical exercise, particularly when used with the intent of self-improvement. Foucault's later work on 'the care of the self', which refers to the active shaping of one's own life, not just as objects of power, but as subjects who can resist and transform themselves, further explores this concept. Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self—A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton, Luther H. Martin (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988).

Conclusion

Nididhyasana, when integrated into philosophical counselling, reclaims philosophy as a mode of being rather than a body of knowledge. Its orientation is neither doctrinal nor psychological but existential. It speaks to the human longing not only for understanding but for coherence, not only for clarity but for transformation. In its highest function, philosophy becomes praxis. The practitioner does not merely interpret life but inhabits it differently. In this light, Nididhyasana is not an adjunct to counselling but its ontological culmination. It does not simply resolve problems but reframes the problem space itself. The client does not emerge with answers but with a shift in being—a re-identification that dissolves the habitual boundaries between subject and object, knower and known.

This reorientation offers fertile ground for further scholarly engagement. How can institutions integrate contemplative modalities into philosophical training? What are the ethical frameworks emergent from a non-dual ontology? How might counselling evolve when grounded not in pathology but in presence? In answering these questions, we continue the philosophical journey that the Upanishads began: not toward abstraction but toward embodiment, not toward speculation but toward transformation. Nididhyasana thus remains, not as a relic of ancient thought, but as a perennial guide to a life well-understood and wisely lived.

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