

When Familiarity Conceals Depth

Civilisational Journal

Movement I: Return to Civilisational Inquiry

Essay 003

Published: 18 May 2026

॥ सा विद्या या विमुक्तये ॥

Human beings possess a natural tendency to mistake familiarity for understanding. What is encountered repeatedly begins to feel known. What is frequently remembered appears self-evident. Over time, repetition creates a sense of intellectual comfort and comfort often creates the illusion that further inquiry is unnecessary.

This tendency is not confined to individuals alone. Entire societies can become deeply familiar with certain ideas, stories and traditions while remaining surprisingly distant from their deeper significance. Civilisational texts are particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon because their very familiarity often obscures the need for renewed examination.

Yet familiarity itself is not a uniform phenomenon. Not all familiarity is acquired in the same manner, nor does every mode of engagement produce the same depth of understanding. Civilisational texts often become familiar through multiple pathways that accompany an individual throughout life. The first encounter usually occurs through culture and tradition. Stories are heard within families, festivals reinforce narratives and customs embed certain civilisational memories into everyday life. This form of familiarity is invaluable because it preserves continuity across generations. It is often the means by which a civilisation first introduces itself to its children. Yet it is also limited. Cultural familiarity frequently transmits conclusions without necessarily transmitting the intellectual

inquiry that originally produced them. One learns what is done, but not always why it is done.

As individuals mature, familiarity may deepen through attentive listening to scholars, teachers and learned interpreters. Such guidance can illuminate dimensions that remain inaccessible to the uninitiated reader. The accumulated wisdom of generations should not be dismissed lightly. Indeed, without commentators, teachers and scholars, many texts would remain inaccessible to large sections of society. Yet even here a subtle risk emerges. The authority of interpretation can sometimes discourage independent inquiry. The listener may inherit conclusions without fully understanding the reasoning that supports them. The scholar becomes remembered; the text itself remains insufficiently explored.

The contemporary age has introduced a third and increasingly influential source of familiarity: social media. Never before has civilisational content travelled with such speed or reached such vast audiences. While this has created opportunities for wider engagement, it has also generated new dangers. Complex ideas are compressed into short posts, isolated quotations are detached from context and interpretations are often shaped to advance the personal, ideological or commercial objectives of the content creator. Familiarity acquired in this manner can spread rapidly while remaining intellectually fragile. It therefore demands particular caution. The reader must resist the temptation of accepting every widely circulated interpretation as truth merely because it is repeated frequently. Civilisational inquiry requires reflection, not digital blind belief (अंधविश्वास).

A story heard repeatedly during childhood may remain vivid throughout life. Characters become recognisable. Important events become easy to recall. Certain lessons become associated with particular episodes. Yet the ability to remember a narrative does not necessarily imply an understanding of the principles, patterns and questions embedded within it.

Indeed, familiarity sometimes creates obstacles that complete unfamiliarity does not.

A person approaching a text for the first time often does so with curiosity. Questions arise naturally because nothing is assumed. The familiar reader, however, frequently approaches the same text with

conclusions already formed. The narrative appears settled before the inquiry has even begun. Recognition replaces investigation.

This is one reason why many of the most profound dimensions of civilisational literature remain hidden in plain sight.

The challenge does not arise because the text lacks depth.

The challenge arises because the reader ceases to look for it.

Across generations, societies often preserve certain episodes while overlooking the broader architecture within which those episodes exist. Individual events become famous. Particular characters attract attention. Isolated moral lessons acquire prominence. Gradually, the text begins to be experienced through fragments rather than as an integrated whole.

The consequence is subtle but significant.

Readers become familiar with what the text contains but remain uncertain about what the text is attempting to explore.

A civilisational text is rarely a collection of disconnected incidents. Its enduring value often lies in the relationships between events, the recurring patterns that emerge across narratives and the questions that continue to surface in different forms throughout the work.

Such patterns rarely reveal themselves during a single reading.

They emerge gradually.

The first reading introduces the narrative.

The second reveals connections.

The third begins to expose structure.

Subsequent readings often uncover assumptions, tensions and insights that previously remained invisible.

This process is neither accidental nor unique to civilisational literature. The same principle applies to philosophy, history, science and even human relationships. The more complex a subject becomes, the more it rewards sustained engagement.

A fourth pathway for familiarity emerges through structured courses of civilisational learning. Universities, institutions and independent programmes often provide systematic exposure to texts, traditions and

intellectual frameworks. Their great strength lies in discipline and organisation. They introduce readers to broader contexts and encourage sustained engagement. Yet even structured learning can inadvertently create dependence upon prescribed interpretations. A curriculum may explain a text, but it cannot exhaust its meaning. The student must eventually move beyond receiving knowledge and begin participating in inquiry.

The fifth and perhaps most demanding pathway is स्वाध्याय (Swadhyaya)—self-study. This represents the reader's direct encounter with the text itself. Free from the immediate influence of teachers, institutions or digital intermediaries, the individual begins the slow task of engaging the work repeatedly, contemplating its patterns and testing inherited assumptions against the text's own internal logic. In this sense, Swadhyaya may be regarded as the purest form of familiarity because it emerges from sustained personal engagement. Yet even self-study possesses limitations. Many readers approach texts through translations or commentaries without access to the original language in which the work was composed. In the Indic context, this often means engaging profound Sanskrit works indirectly. Such engagement remains valuable, but it inevitably introduces layers of interpretation between the reader and the original expression.

The civilisational tradition itself recognised this challenge and proposed a disciplined progression for genuine understanding: श्रवण (Shravana), मनन (Manana) and निदिध्यासन (Nididhyasana). One first listens or encounters an idea (Shravana). One then reflects upon it critically and repeatedly (Manana). Finally, one contemplates it deeply until it becomes internalised as lived understanding (Nididhyasana). Familiarity may arise at the stage of hearing. Understanding emerges only through reflection and contemplation. Modern readers often seek to move directly from exposure to conclusion, bypassing the demanding middle stages that transform information into wisdom.

A useful illustration may be found in the study of Kautilya's statecraft. Many readers today encounter civilisational knowledge not through primary texts but through summaries, quotations and secondary interpretations. While such works often serve as valuable introductions, they can also perpetuate inaccuracies that gradually acquire the status of

accepted truth through repetition. Consider the well-known sequence associated with Kautilya's instruments of statecraft: सामोपप्रदानभेदोदण्डः (Samopapradanabhedodandah). In contemporary writings, this is frequently simplified as Sama (साम), Dana (दान), Bheda (भेद) and Danda (दण्ड). More significantly, some modern interpretations even interchange the positions of Bheda and Danda, presenting the sequence as Sama, Dana, Danda and Bheda.

This alteration may appear trivial, yet its implications are profound. In Kautilya's formulation, Danda—coercive force—appears as the final instrument after other measures have been exhausted. Bheda, involving division, diplomacy, persuasion and the exploitation of differences, precedes the application of force. The sequence reflects a graduated approach to political engagement in which violence remains a measure of last resort. By reversing the order and placing Danda before Bheda, the logic of the framework itself is distorted. The reader is subtly taught that force should precede diplomatic or political manoeuvre, a conclusion fundamentally different from the one conveyed by the original text.

The problem extends beyond sequence alone. Even the commonly used expression Dana does not fully capture Kautilya's intent. The Arthashastra employs the idea of उपप्रदान (Upapradana)—offering something with the expectation of a reciprocal political outcome. This differs significantly from dana in the conventional sense of charitable giving, where no return is expected. Such distinctions may appear technical, yet they demonstrate how easily meaning can shift when readers depend exclusively upon interpretations without consulting primary sources.

The lesson is not that commentaries, summaries or secondary works lack value. They remain indispensable guides. Rather, it is that familiarity with interpretations should never be mistaken for familiarity with the text itself. Wherever possible, readers must cultivate the habit of returning to primary sources. Only then can they distinguish between what the text actually says and what successive generations have assumed that it says. For civilisational inquiry ultimately demands not merely the inheritance of conclusions, but the discipline of verification.

For this reason, every pathway to familiarity must ultimately be accompanied by intellectual humility. Whether familiarity arises through

culture, scholarship, social media, institutional learning or self-study, none should be mistaken for understanding itself. Familiarity is the beginning of inquiry, not its conclusion. Unless readers remain willing to revisit texts repeatedly, question inherited assumptions and engage primary sources as directly as circumstances permit, the deeper architecture of civilisational wisdom may remain concealed beneath the comfort of recognition.

Yet modern habits frequently encourage the opposite.

Contemporary culture often values speed over depth. Information is consumed rapidly. Summaries replace texts. Excerpts replace arguments. Conclusions circulate independently of the reasoning that produced them. Under such conditions, familiarity becomes easier to achieve than understanding.

One may recognise a quotation without understanding its context.

One may recall an event without understanding its significance.

One may know the conclusion while remaining unaware of the inquiry that produced it.

This distinction becomes particularly important when approaching texts that have shaped civilisations over centuries.

Such texts endured not because they provided information alone. They endured because successive generations discovered within them insights relevant to changing circumstances. The questions persisted even when the contexts evolved.

This is why serious engagement with civilisational literature demands a certain intellectual humility.

The familiar reader must learn to read as though encountering the text anew.

Assumptions must occasionally be suspended.

Inherited interpretations must be examined.

Popular conclusions must be revisited.

The purpose is not to reject tradition but to understand it more deeply.

Paradoxically, the most respectful way to approach a great text may be to acknowledge that it has not yet been exhausted.

A civilisation demonstrates confidence in its inheritance not when it assumes that every question has already been answered, but when it continues asking questions of the texts it has chosen to preserve.

For this reason, genuine inquiry begins precisely where familiarity ends.

The familiar says:

“I already know this.”

The inquiring mind asks:

“What have I not yet understood?”

That question transforms reading from recollection into discovery.

It allows the text to become more than a remembered narrative.

It becomes a living conversation.

And it is within that conversation that the deeper possibilities of civilisational wisdom begin to reveal themselves.

— End of Essay 003—

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