

Vijñānabhikṣu: The Architect of Integral Hindu Unity and the Rejuvenation of the Astika Darshanas

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The Hermeneutic Crisis of the Sixteenth Century

In the panoramic history of Indian intellectual thought, few figures occupy a position as pivotal yet paradoxically under-examined as Vijñānabhikṣu. Emerging in the sixteenth century, a period characterized by vibrant sectarian fermentation and the looming shadow of Mughal political consolidation, Vijñānabhikṣu stands as a colossus of syncretic scholasticism. His intellectual project was nothing less than the philosophical unification of the orthodox (*astika*) systems of Hindu thought—Samkhya, Yoga, and Vedānta—against the perceived nihilism of the heterodox (*nastika*) schools and the illusionist metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta. To understand Vijñānabhikṣu is to understand the crystallization of "Hinduism" not merely as a colonial construct, as some post-structuralist historiography might suggest, but as an indigenous, pre-colonial theological category defined by a shared adherence to the Veda and a realist ontology of the soul.

This essay posits that without the intervention of Vijñānabhikṣu, the philosophical architecture of Sanātana Dharma would be significantly impoverished, lacking the robust theistic realism that bridges the gap between the dualism of Samkhya and the monism of the Upanishads. His work represents a watershed moment where the divergent streams of Indian philosophy were forcefully directed into a single river of *Avibhagadvaita* (Indistinguishable Non-Dualism), a system that honors diversity within unity. By interrogating his commentaries on the *Yoga Sūtras*, the *Samkhya Sūtras*, and the *Brahma Sūtras*, we will establish Vijñānabhikṣu not merely as a commentator, but as an original thinker whose hermeneutics of 'reconciliation'

(*samanvaya*) anticipated and shaped the Neo-Vedantic revival of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Furthermore, the relevance of Vijñānabhikṣu in 2026 remains acute. As modern Indology grapples with the recently contested authorship of the *Patanjalayogasutrabhasyavivarana*; attributed by some to Adi Shankara, Vijñānabhikṣu's *Yogavarttika* provides the essential counter-narrative, offering a realist reading of Yoga that resists the gravitational pull of Shankara's illusionism. This essay will explore the contours of his thought, his combat with the *nastika* systems, establishing his enduring legacy, drawing upon a wealth of primary texts, doctoral dissertations, and critical studies to present a definitive account of the man and his mission.

The Historical Figure: Vijñānabhikṣu in Time and Space

The sixteenth century in North India was a time of immense flux. While the Mughal Empire was establishing its hegemony, the Bhakti movement was reaching its zenith, with figures like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534) and Vallabhacharya (1479–1531) radically redefining the relationship between the human soul and the Divine. It was in this milieu of devotional fervor and scholastic rigor that Vijñānabhikṣu emerged.

Unlike the wandering ascetics of the epic period, Vijñānabhikṣu operates as a situated scholastic. While precise biographical details are notoriously scant in the Indian tradition, internal textual evidence and the colophons of his works allow us to construct a plausible historical profile. He is generally dated to the latter half of the sixteenth century (c. 1550–1600 CE). This placement makes him a younger contemporary of the early Gaudiya

Vaishnava theologians and the Advaitin dialectician Madhusudana Sarasvati.

The Question of Origin: Bihar or Bengal?

A significant scholarly debate persists regarding Vijñānabhikṣu's geographical origins. Traditional accounts and some modern scholarship suggest a connection to Bengal or Bihar. The density of his engagement with *Navya-Nyaya* (New Logic), a school that flourished in Mithila (Bihar) and Navadvīpa (Bengal), supports this regional affiliation. His fierce realism and logical acumen bear the hallmarks of the eastern Indian intellectual tradition. Moreover, his disciple, Bhava Ganesha, who wrote the *Yogasutradīpikā*, is often associated with the Chitpavan Brahmins of Varanasi, suggesting that Vijñānabhikṣu likely spent his mature years in Varanasi, the pan-Indian center of Sanskrit learning, teaching a diverse cohort of students.

The suffix "Bhikṣu" in his name indicates his status as a renunciate (*sannyasin*). However, unlike the Shankari sannyasins who adhered to strict monism, Vijñānabhikṣu's asceticism was grounded in a theistic Yoga that did not deny the reality of the world. He represents a specific strand of ascetic intellectualism that sought to integrate the path of knowledge (*jñāna*) with the path of devotion (*bhakti*), a synthesis that would become the hallmark of his *Avibhagadvaita* philosophy.

The Philosophical Magnum Opus: Avibhagadvaita

At the heart of Vijñānabhikṣu's system is the doctrine of *Avibhagadvaita*, or 'Non-duality of Non-separation.' This philosophical innovation was his solution to the

perennial Vedantic problem: how to reconcile the scriptural texts that speak of difference (*bheda*) between the soul and God with those that speak of non-difference (*abheda*).

Shankara's *Kevaladvaita* (Absolute Non-Dualism) resolves this by declaring difference to be illusory (*mithya*). Ramanuja's *Visistadvaita* (Qualified Non-Dualism) views the world as the body of God, possessing an organic unity. Vijñānabhikṣu rejects both. He argues that "non-difference" in scripture does not mean "identity" (*aikya*) but rather "inseparability" (*avibhaga*).

Drawing on the analogy of rivers merging into the ocean, Vijñānabhikṣu contends that just as the river water becomes indistinguishable from the ocean water without ceasing to be water, the liberated soul becomes indistinguishable from Brahman without losing its ontological reality. The soul and the world are real, eternal distinct entities, yet they exist in a state of eternal non-separation from Brahman, who is their substratum and inner controller (*antaryamin*).

The Hermeneutics of Conflict: Bheda and Abheda Srutis

Vijñānabhikṣu's hermeneutical strategy is radically inclusivist. He refuses to subordinate the "dualistic" (*bheda*) texts of the Upanishads to the "monistic" (*abheda*) texts, as the Advaitins do. Instead, he accords equal validity to both.

- **Bheda Srutis:** Texts like "Two birds, united always... one eats the sweet fruit, the other looks on" (*Mundaka Upanishad* 3.1.1) are taken literally as establishing the eternal distinction between the *Jiva* (individual soul) and *Ishvara* (God).

- **Abheda Srutis:** Texts like *Tat Tvam Asi* ("That Thou Art") are interpreted not as asserting "You are God" in an absolute sense, but "You belong to God" or "You are not separate from God." He argues that if total identity were meant, the scriptures would be rendering the world of experience a nullity, which contradicts the realist epistemology of the Vedas.

By validating the reality of the separation, Vijñānabhikṣu preserves the theological space for *Bhakti* (devotion), which requires a distinction between the lover and the Beloved. By affirming non-separation, he preserves the Vedantic intuition of the unity of all existence. This *Avibhagadvaita* serves as the metaphysical foundation for his unification of Samkhya, Yoga, and Vedanta.

The Rehabilitation of Samkhya: Combating the Charge of Non-Transcendence

One of Vijñānabhikṣu's most significant contributions to Hindu intellectual history is his "theologization" of the Samkhya system. Classical Samkhya, as codified in Ishvarakrishna's *Samkhyakarika*, is notoriously silent on God, leading to its classification as *Nirishvara* Samkhya by commentators like Shankara.

The Doctrine of Praudhivada (Pedagogical Concession)

In his *Samkhyapravacanabhāṣya*, a commentary on the *Samkhya Sūtras*, Vijñānabhikṣu confronts the sūtras that explicitly state, "Ishvara is not proved" (*ishvarasiddheh*). A lesser intellect might have capitulated or ignored these texts. Vijñānabhikṣu, however, employs a brilliant hermeneutic device: *Praudhivada* (bold assertion or pedagogical concession).

He argues that Kapila, the founder of Samkhya, was an incarnation of Vishnu (a belief supported by the *Bhagavata Purana*) and therefore could not negate Ishvara. Why, then, did he deny God? Vijñānabhikṣu asserts that this denial was a strategic device intended to detach aspirants from the desire for divine lordship (*aishvarya*). If Samkhya had emphasized God, practitioners might have sought to become "god-like" or attain heavenly pleasures, thereby missing the ultimate goal of *Kaivalya* (isolation of the Purusha from Prakriti). By provisionally denying God, Kapila forced the aspirant to focus entirely on the discrimination between the Self and the Non-Self.

Integrating Prakriti into Brahman

Vijñānabhikṣu further bridges the gap between Samkhya dualism and Vedantic monism by redefining the status of *Prakriti* (matter). In Classical Samkhya, Prakriti is an independent, eternal principle. Vijñānabhikṣu demotes Prakriti to the status of a power (*Shakti*) of Brahman. It is real and eternal, yes, but it is not independent. It resides within Brahman in the state of dissolution and is projected forth by the will of Ishvara at the time of creation. This masterstroke allows Vijñānabhikṣu to accept the entire cosmological evolution of Samkhya (the 24 tattvas) while subsuming it under a theistic Vedantic framework.

The Battle for Yoga: Vijñānabhikṣu vs. Shankara

The interpretation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* represents a critical battlefield in Vijñānabhikṣu's war against Advaita. The recent scholarly interest in the *Patanjalayogasutrabhasyavivarana* (a commentary attributed to Adi Shankara) highlights the stakes of this conflict.

The *Vivarana* vs. The *Yogavarttika*

The *Vivarana*, if accepted as Shankara's work, represents an attempt to read Yoga through an Advaitic lens, minimizing the reality of the external world and reducing the plurality of Purushas to an illusion. Vijñānabhikṣu's *Yogavarttika* (a sub-commentary on Vyasa's *Bhashya*) stands as a bulwark against this "Advaitization" of Yoga.

Vijñānabhikṣu insists on the absolute reality of the external world. He argues that if the objects of meditation were illusory, the result of meditation (*Samadhi*) would also be illusory, rendering the entire practice of Yoga futile. He defends the plurality of selves (*Purusha-bahutva*) as an experiential fact confirmed by the diversity of human experience (birth, death, enjoyment). While Advaita collapses this diversity into the "One Self," Vijñānabhikṣu maintains that the unity of Purushas is only generic (they are all of the nature of consciousness) and not numerical.

The Theory of Double Reflection (Bimba-Pratibimba)

A key area of divergence is epistemology. How does the immutable Purusha "know" the changing states of the mind (*Buddhi*)? The Advaitic view (found in Vachaspati Misra and the *Vivarana*) often employs a theory of single reflection: the Purusha is reflected in the clear mirror of the *Buddhi*, and this reflection falsely identifies with the mental modifications.

Vijñānabhikṣu proposes a more complex "Double Reflection" theory. He argues that for experience (*bhoga*) to occur, there must be mutual contact.

1. The modification of the Buddhi (e.g., the thought "this is a pot") is reflected in the Purusha.
2. The consciousness of the Purusha is reflected back into the Buddhi.

This reciprocal reflection allows the Purusha to witness the thought without undergoing actual change, while simultaneously energizing the inert Buddhi with the semblance of consciousness.

This mechanism preserves the Samkhya dualism while explaining the phenomenological unity of the knower and the known.

Isvara Pranidhana: Means or End?

In the *Vivarana* and other Advaitic readings, *Isvara-pranidhana* (devotion to God) is often treated as a preliminary step, a means to concentration for those unable to practice abstract meditation. Vijñānabhikṣu elevates it to a supreme status. He interprets *Isvara-pranidhana* in the *Kriya Yoga* section not just as a preparatory discipline but as a direct path to *Samadhi*. For him, the emotional intensity of devotion (*Bhakti*) is a valid and potent yogic technique that accelerates the attainment of liberation, a view that aligns Yoga with the theistic currents of his time.

Combating the Nastika Systems: The Defense of Realism

Vijñānabhikṣu's intellectual combat was not limited to internal Hindu disputes; he was a fierce adversary of the *Nastika* (heterodox) schools—Charvaka, Buddhism, and Jainism. His defense of *Astika* Dharma relied on dismantling their epistemological and ontological foundations.

Contra Charvaka: The Necessity of Inference

The Charvaka school's rejection of inference (*anumana*) and reliance solely on perception (*pratyaksha*) was a primary target. Vijñānabhikṣu argues in the *Samkhyapravacanabhāṣya* that the Charvaka position is self-refuting. To assert "Inference is not valid" is itself a universal claim that cannot be established by perception alone; it requires inference. If a Charvaka sees smoke and does not infer fire, they would not avoid it; their survival depends on the very cognitive process they deny.

Ontologically, he attacks the Charvaka materialism which reduces consciousness to a byproduct of the elements (*bhūta-chaitanya-vāda*). Vijñānabhikṣu uses the Sāṃkhya argument of "Teleology" (*samghata-pararthatvat*): composite objects (like the body) exist for the sake of something non-composite (the Self). The unity of apperception—the "I" that persists through childhood, youth, and old age—cannot be a property of the ever-changing material atoms of the body.

Contra Buddhism: Momentariness and the Void

Vijñānabhikṣu's critique of Buddhism focuses on *Kṣhanikavāda* (Doctrine of Momentariness) and *Vijñānavāda* (Yogācāra Idealism).

- **Against Momentariness:** He argues that if the self were momentarily changing, there could be no memory (*smṛti*) or recognition (*pratyabhijñā*). The agent who performed an action (karma) would be different from the agent who experiences the result (*phala*), destroying the moral order of the universe. This leads to the absurdity of *kṛtapraṇāśa* (destruction of what is done) and *akṛtabhyāgama* (acquisition of what is not done).

- **Against Vijñānavada:** Vijñānabhikṣu defends the extra-mental reality of objects. He argues that if the external world were merely a projection of consciousness (like a dream), there would be no distinction between valid waking perception and hallucination. The stability and shared nature of the waking world prove its independence from the individual mind. He equates Shankara's *Maya* with this Buddhist subjectivism to discredit both simultaneously.

Contra Jainism: The Paradox of Syadvada

While respecting the Jaina belief in the soul, Vijñānabhikṣu finds their epistemological relativism (*Syadvada* or *Saptabhanginaya*) intolerable. The Jaina assertion that reality can be both "existent and non-existent" from different perspectives violates the Law of Non-Contradiction. Vijñānabhikṣu argues that such ambiguity leads to a paralysis of knowledge. For liberation to occur, the aspirant must have determinate knowledge (*nischaya*) of the difference between Purusha and Prakriti. If the nature of reality is fundamentally indeterminate, *Moksha* becomes impossible. He characterizes *Anekantavada* not as 'intellectual non-violence' but as epistemological confusion.

The Polemic of the "Crypto-Buddhist" (Pracchanna Bauddha)

Vijñānabhikṣu's most famous and acerbic contribution to Hindu doxography is his classification of Advaita Vedanta as a crypto-Buddhist heresy. This was not merely a sectarian slur but a substantive philosophical argument.

In his commentary on the *Padma Purana*, he highlights verses where Shiva as destroyer, declares: "The theory of *Maya* is a false scripture (*asat-shastra*), Buddhism in disguise (*pracchanna-bauddha*); it was propounded by me in the Kali age in the form of a Brahmin

(Shankara) to delude the world". See Swami B.V. Giri's online essay *Māyāvāda and Buddhism – Are They One and the Same?* at rupanugabhajanashram.com.

Philosophically, Vijñānabhikṣu identifies the convergence between the *Nirguna Brahman* (Attributeless Absolute) of Advaita and the *Sunya* (Void) of Madhyamika Buddhism. He argues:

1. Both systems deny the reality of the world.
2. Both deny the reality of the individual agent (*kartr*).
3. Both posit a "two-truths" theory (*Vyavaharika* vs. *Paramarthika*) to explain away empirical experience.

For Vijñānabhikṣu, a Brahman that is devoid of all attributes, powers, and internal distinctions is functionally equivalent to the Void. It is a "blank" Absolute that cannot serve as the ground of religious life or the creator of the universe. By exposing these parallels, Vijñānabhikṣu sought to purge Vedanta of what he saw as nihilistic accretions and restore the robust Puranic theism of the *Brahma Sutras*.

Reception and Legacy: From the 16th Century to 2026

The reception of Vijñānabhikṣu's work has undergone a dramatic oscillation, reflecting the changing tides of Indological fashion.

The Colonial Era: The "Standard" Interpreter

In the early colonial period (late 18th and early 19th centuries), early Orientalists like H.T. Colebrooke relied heavily on Vijñānabhikṣu's commentaries to understand Samkhya. His theistic reading was initially accepted as the standard interpretation. However, German Indologist Richard Garbe later spearheaded a movement to "purify" Samkhya, arguing that the original system was atheistic and that Vijñānabhikṣu had "adulterated" it with Vedantic theism.

For decades, Vijñānabhikṣu was dismissed in Western academia as a late, derivative distorter of the tradition.

The Neo-Vedanta Connection

Paradoxically, while Western scholars were sidelining him, Vijñānabhikṣu's synthetic model was quietly shaping the modern Hindu renaissance. Swami Vivekananda, the father of Neo-Vedanta, heavily utilized Vijñānabhikṣu's harmonization of the Yogas. Vivekananda's "Raja Yoga" owes a conceptual debt to Vijñānabhikṣu's classification, and his inclusive vision of "Hinduism" as a unified system with diverse paths mirrors Vijñānabhikṣu's *Avibhagadvaita* doxography. Andrew Nicholson's groundbreaking research (*Unifying Hinduism*) has conclusively shown that the modern idea of a unified "Hinduism" was not a British invention but a pre-colonial project initiated by thinkers like Vijñānabhikṣu. Contemporary Resurgence (2000–2026)

In the 21st century, Vijñānabhikṣu has been rehabilitated.

- **Andrew Nicholson (Harvard/Stony Brook):** His PhD dissertation and subsequent book have re-centered Vijñānabhikṣu as a creative theologian who successfully integrated the *Astika* schools. Nicholson argues that Vijñānabhikṣu's definition of *Astika* (belief in the Veda) vs. *Nastika* helped forge the boundaries of modern Hindu identity.²⁷
- **T.S. Rukmani (Concordia/Delhi):** Her critical translations of the *Yogavarttika* (4 volumes) have made Vijñānabhikṣu's dense Sanskrit accessible, revealing the sophistication of his double-reflection epistemology.
- **Knut Jacobsen (University of Bergen):** Has explored Vijñānabhikṣu's role in the theistic turn of Samkhya-Yoga.

- **Current Trends (up to 2026):** Recent scholarship continues to mine his works for a "non-illusionist" Vedanta. With the rising interest in "Realist Vedanta" and "Acintya Bhedabheda" (Gaudiya theology), Vijñānabhikṣu's *Avibhagadvaita* is increasingly studied as a viable philosophical alternative to Shankara's Advaita, offering resources for a theology that affirms the world and environmental ethics (since Prakṛiti is real).¹

Conclusion: Toward a Holistic Theological Hermeneutics

The legacy of Vijñānabhikṣu offers a vital corrective to the monolithic view of Hindu philosophy often presented in introductory texts. He demonstrates that "Hinduism" is not synonymous with "illusionism." By rigorously defending the reality of the world, the permanence of the soul, and the supremacy of a personal God, while simultaneously upholding the non-separateness of all things, Vijñānabhikṣu provides a *holistic theological hermeneutic*.

This hermeneutic allows for:

1. **Philosophical Pluralism:** Accepting the validity of Samkhya analysis and Yoga practice within a Vedantic framework.
2. **Religious Realism:** Affirming the validity of ritual, ethics, and devotion as interactions with a real world, not a dream.
3. **Integral Unity:** Understanding "Non-Dualism" not as the erasure of difference, but as the harmony of the Whole (*Amshi*) and its parts (*Amsa*).

Without Vijñānabhikṣu, our Dharma would indeed be poorer—deprived of one of its most rigorous defenses of theism and one of its most successful attempts to hold the

One and the Many in a unified vision.

Endnotes

Vijñānabhikṣu: A 16th-century Indian philosopher (c. 1550–1600 CE) from the Bihar/Bengal region. He is a key figure in the "Bhedabheda" (Difference and Non-difference) school of Vedanta and a revitalizer of theistic Samkhya. His title "Bhikṣu" denotes a renunciate. He is the author of *Yogavarttika*, *Samkhyapravacanabhāṣya*, and *Vijñānamrtaḥāṣya* (commentary on Brahma Sutras).

Astika vs. Nastika: Classification terms in Indian philosophy. *Astika* (affirmers) accepts the authority of the Vedas (Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa, Vedanta). *Nastika* (deniers) rejects Vedic authority (Charvaka, Buddhism, Jainism). Vijñānabhikṣu's project was the unification of the *Astika* schools against the *Nastika* critique.

Avibhagadvaita: "Indistinguishable Non-Dualism." Vijñānabhikṣu's specific ontological stance. It posits that the Soul (*Jiva*) and World (*Jagat*) are real and distinct from Brahman, but in the state of liberation or dissolution, they are "inseparable" (*avibhaga*) and thus indistinguishable, like a drop of water in the ocean. This distinguishes him from Shankara (who says they are identical/illusory) and Madhva (who says they are eternally separate).

Pracchanna Bauddha: Literally "Crypto-Buddhist." A polemical term used by theistic Vedantins (including Vijñānabhikṣu, Ramanuja, and Bhaskara) to attack Advaita Vedanta. They argued that the Advaitic concepts of *Nirguna Brahman* (attribute-less God) and *Maya* (illusion) were borrowings from the Buddhist concepts of *Sunya* (Void) and *Vijnaptimatra* (Consciousness-only), smuggled into the Vedas.

Bheda and Abheda Srutis: Scriptural texts asserting "Difference" (e.g., *Svetasvatara Upanishad*) vs. those asserting "Non-Difference" (e.g., *Chandogya Upanishad*). Vijñānabhikṣu reconciled these by according reality to both: Difference is real in the state of creation (*samsara*), while Non-difference (as non-separation) is real in the state of liberation (*moksha*).

Kshanikavada: The Buddhist Doctrine of Momentariness. The belief that all conditioned phenomena (*dharmas*) exist only for a discrete moment (*kshana*) and then perish. Vijñānabhikṣu refuted this to establish the enduring nature of the Soul (*Atman*).

Syadvada: The Jaina Doctrine of Conditional Predication ("Maybe it is..."). It asserts that all judgments are relative to a particular standpoint (*naya*). Vijñānabhikṣu critiqued this for leading to logical contradictions and preventing decisive knowledge (*nischaya*).

Double Reflection Theory (Bimba-Pratibimba): Vijñānabhikṣu's epistemological innovation. Unlike the single reflection of object-into-mind found in other schools, he argued for a mutual reflection: the Mind (*Buddhi*) reflects the object to the Soul (*Purusha*), and the Soul reflects its consciousness back to the Mind. This explains how the inert mind appears conscious and the changeless soul appears to experience pain/pleasure.

Andrew J. Nicholson: A contemporary Indologist whose PhD dissertation (University of Chicago) and book *Unifying Hinduism* have been central to the modern re-evaluation of Vijñānabhikṣu. He argues that Vijñānabhikṣu was a proto-modern thinker who constructed a unified "Hindu" identity long before the British colonial period.

T.S. Rukmani: A prominent scholar of Yoga and Vedanta. She produced the first

complete critical translation of Vijñānabhikṣu's *Yogavarttika* (4 volumes) and compared it extensively with Shankara's *Vivarana*, reviving interest in Vijñānabhikṣu's specific contributions to Yoga philosophy.

Bhava Ganesha: The direct disciple of Vijñānabhikṣu and a prolific commentator in his own right. His work *Yogasutradipika* helps establish the lineage and continuity of Vijñānabhikṣu's school in Varanasi.

Praudhivada: "Bold Assertion" or "Pedagogical Concession." A hermeneutic device used by Vijñānabhikṣu to explain away the atheistic sutras of Samkhya. He argued that Kapila knew God existed but denied Him "boldly" to help students detach from the desire for divine powers.

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All web citations have been removed. The Endnotes are more of a helpful glossary. The bibliography above is kept to the minimal.