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**The Pertinence of the Upanisadic Understanding of
Consciousness in contemporary World**

Full Paper

The present paper aims to analyse the Upaniṣadic study of Consciousness which provides a method for experiencing the spiritual centre of human existence.

Consciousness is central to human existence because all objective phenomena are believed to exist as manifestations of Consciousness. The very idea of being familiar with Consciousness provides a testimony to its existence. What Augustine said about time is well applicable to Consciousness. According to him when one was not talking about it, one knew what it was, but when asked about it one no longer knows it.¹ One misses out on understanding Consciousness when one tries to hold it, cognize it and objectify it. It appears ethereal and almost deceptive because it is intangible, the more we try to apprehend it the more it slips from the grip.

The Sanskrit term for Consciousness is 'Cit'. Quite often we find the terms 'jñāna' and 'vijñāna' being used interchangeably for Consciousness in Upaniṣads. The discussion of 'Consciousness' is found in the Upaniṣads while explaining the real nature of the Self/ātman. The ātman, though usually translated as 'Self', does not refer to the empirical self, the 'I'. In the Upaniṣads, both ātman and Cit refers to Pure Consciousness, a kind of trans-empirical Consciousness, which not only is different from the empirical consciousness, but also is the source/ substratum of the later. In the Upaniṣads the terms 'Self', 'ātman', 'Brahman', 'Consciousness', 'Pure-Consciousness', 'Cit' have been used synonymously.

The study of Consciousness is "evasive". Nevertheless, it has generated much curiosity and interest in the minds of academicians, neuro scientists, researchers etc. In the contemporary west, Consciousness is quite often viewed as an epi-phenomenon of matter and also

¹ Whitney J. Oaks (ed.), 'The confession', chapter xiv. Basic Writings of Saint Augustine, (New York: Random House, 1948), 191.

sometimes equated with the mind. For the most part, Consciousness and mind are treated as synonymous and used interchangeably; and intentionality is regarded as a defining characteristic of Consciousness. Consciousness is always seen 'of' or 'about' something; and the goal of the pursuit is one of seeking rational understanding of what consciousness/mind is.

In India philosophers have undertaken a complex study of Consciousness but most of the studies have tried to incorporate the views based on the *Upaniṣads* in general. According to *Advaita Vedānta*, *antaḥkaraṇa* or the mind, is like everything, a product of ignorance. The Self alone is Consciousness, and it cannot arise as a contingent factor of subject-object relation. The *Advaita* agrees with the modern psychologists and says that mind is just a totality of conscious states and process. The Self which is neither mind nor matter is the ground of both mental and physical states of experiences. Consciousness reveals everything and is the substratum of all experience, viz., the wakeful, dream and deep-sleep. It is not a mere knowing but involves transcendence of the objects known and the knowing process. According to *Advaita* tradition mind is that which has a locus in time and space, whereas Consciousness is that which is not limited either by time or space, but gives a meaning to these. In this tradition mind, like matter, is only an appearance in Consciousness.

Indian philosophy in general does not accord any concrete status and an abode to the mind (*manas*). *Manas* is a name given to a series of conscious activities such as desires, aversion, pleasure, pain, thought, etc. and also to memory through which it is capable of referring to the past, present and future. That there is a Self for whom these mental modes exist cannot be denied. Apart from the qualities of the mind it is very difficult to know the pure Self at the empirical state, for the former are the only means through which knowledge can arise. Hence, the mind is an instrument, an *antaḥkaraṇa* whose activity is as an indicator of the existence of the pure Self.

According to *Advaita Vedānta*, Consciousness is not a characteristic of mind but self-manifesting, non-intentional principle of awareness. They hold that self-luminosity is the defining principle of Consciousness; i.e. Consciousness is immediately experienced, even though it is not an object of knowledge. It is called the subject, not in the sense of 'knower' or 'cognizer' (*Jñātā* or *pramātā*), but in the sense that it is the ultimate revealing principle, the transcendental a-priori, which itself is not revealed by anything else. It is often described

in the *Advaita* literature as *prakāsa eka rāsa*, meaning that which has only one *rasa* or essence that is manifestation. Therefore, Consciousness is described as the ‘light of lights’ (*Jyotisām jyotiḥ*) as the ultimate presupposition of all knowledge.

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, one of the principal philosophical treatises deals with the analysis of the three states (*avasthatrya*) of Consciousness namely: wakeful (*jagrat*), dream (*svapna*) and deep sleep (*susupti*), which are universally experienced by all human beings. It brings out the nature of Consciousness through a comprehensive and rigorous investigation of the three states demonstrating that Consciousness is non-dual, continuous and pervasive in and through the three states of experience. It stands as an irrefutable principle. One can speak of one’s experience only if one is conscious of it; and to be conscious means to be Consciousness itself. One does not possess Consciousness as an adjective but one is that principle itself.

The main feature of the wakeful state is the commonness of experience about the phenomenal world. All human perception, ideation, reasoning and anticipation about the external world are considered as the output of this state. The mind and the senses which function in this state aided by physical light and consciousness are the instruments through which one experiences every kind of external object. When consciousness is directed through the mind and sense-organs to the external world, one experiences his physical body along with external world. The consciousness in the wakeful state indicates that the external world is solid, rigid, tangible set in its laws completely oriented towards exteriority of objects and loses the opportunity to know itself. Wrong identification with the world seemingly causes bondage and the Self/ *ātman* appears to be bound. The identification is only apparent, not real.

In the state of dream, the dreamer’s mind and sense organs cease to direct consciousness towards the body or the external world. The mind remains internally active, is aware of internal objects and has internal perceptions: based on the impressions of the world experienced in the wakeful state, the mind projects a dream world of dream objects, dream sensations, dream interactions, dream consequences. The physical laws of matter, time and space that govern the waking experience are effortlessly re-imagined, re-inscribed, deconstructed and reconstructed by the dreamer, often in radical and fantastic ways. In this state, when awareness is withdrawn from the outside world and illumines only the mind, the dreamer experiences within himself/herself a subtle body in subtle relationship with a subtle world. Dream objects are indeed experienced just as tangibly by the dreamer as material objects are experienced in the wakeful state. However, in the wakeful state one can review one’s dream experience and each time confirm that it was a different modality; one knows

with full certainty that the dream objects, however ordinary or extraordinary, were purely internal, subtle and composed of impressions gathered from the wakeful state.

In the deep sleep state, senses and the entire *antahkaraṇa* comprising of intellect, mind, ego and memory remains non-operative. This state is shorn off all desires, dreams and erroneous cognition. The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* refers to this state as *Prajñānaghana*-a mass of undivided, uniform consciousness.² This state is free from both knowledge as well as ignorance owing to the absence of above *antahkaraṇa*. The Consciousness therefore remains blissful and peaceful (*ānadamaya*).³ The continuity of Consciousness is established when one wakes from deep sleep. It is only then one is able to explain recollection of the experience such as “I slept happily and I did not know anything”. This recollection is possible because of presence of Consciousness in that state. The deep sleep state is the source for wakeful and dream states.

The state of sleep is common, reflexive, uneventful, unavoidable and universal, but is also a potent reminder of the astonishing fact that in sleep all limitations of the finite, perishable, external material body and world, to which we are bound while awake, can be instantaneously and absolutely transcended. Like the wakeful and dream states, sleep is not permanent; and in contrast to both, in the deep sleep state the jiva does not experience any object, internal or external, gross or subtle. However, this temporary, thorough, profound subsuming of awareness is not a voiding or annihilation the Self. Upon waking, immediately returned to the experience of his/her particular material body and world, the jiva is just as swiftly able to recall that in deep sleep he/she had experienced nothing, internally and externally. This fact is proof that Consciousness is ever-present/inherent in this apparently total absence of self, though without relation to objects or other phenomena. Were Consciousness not ever-present/inherent, upon waking the sleeper would not be able to recall the condition of being without awareness in the state of deep sleep; would not be able to declare with regard to the experience of deep sleep, “I was not conscious then.” The point to be taken here is that when objects (gross or subtle, external or internal), are present, they are revealed/perceived through Consciousness; and when there are no objects present, what alone prevails is pure Consciousness alone – singular, inviolable, immaculate.

In the deep sleep state, the experience of absolute peace (i.e., when there is no disruption since no impressions are inscribed on awareness) is common to all beings and is enjoyed equally by king and pauper, the criminal and the righteous, the wise and the foolish. The same peace is attained in deep sleep by everyone, regardless if one sleeps hungry or well-fed, after great joy or intense suffering, after celebration or after mourning. This may be explained by the fact that in the state of deep sleep, there remains no jiva with his/her particularized experience – there is no ‘I’/ego-bound creatural entity available to engage with the condition of deep sleep, hence there is no possibility of the antahkarana recording the experience as an

² Nikhilananda Swami, *The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad with Gaudapada Karika and Sankara’s commentary* trans.(Calcutta:Advaita Ashrama, 2000), 22

³ *Ibid.*,23.

existential phenomenon.

In the deep sleep, there is complete unity; there is no imaging, objectification, relation, inscription or utterance of any kind. The only manifestation is of atman: Pure Consciousness, inviolate, indivisible and infinite. *Jivatva*, the embedded, intractable, indelible conviction that one is a distinct individual, a material/mental being separate from all other beings, is completely resolved in this manifestation. If even an atom of personhood persisted in this state, each *jiva* would have a unique experience of deep sleep, just as the wakeful and dream states are different for everyone. Upon waking from the supreme non-differentiation of deep sleep, *jivatva* fully and irrefutably reasserts itself: one seamlessly inhabits one's particularized mind-body complex in all its finitude, just as it was prior to its dissolution in deep sleep. Thus, though the state of deep sleep is radically different from the other two states, it cannot be dissociated from the fluctuations of daily awareness. One cannot wake as anything other than what one materially/mentally is; nor can one defy the laws of time, space and causality that are so arbitrarily and effortlessly suspended, foreclosed, severed and re-aggregated in the dream state.

The three states alternate and differ from one another. But the Self/Consciousness that underlies them is unchanging. The Self remains unaffected and unattached to them. The experiences of the three states are radically different from one another. Yet one who goes through them remains the same. The evidence of memory in the form, "I am that", shows its oneness in all the three states. One knows. "It is the same 'I' that was asleep and dreamt is now awake". The Self is non-dual and pervasive in all the three states of experience and is conceived in three ways. Though the states are essentially one, they differ because of the difference in the conditioning factors. The Self is the same though it is seen in three different states (*eka eva tridhā smṛtaḥ*).⁴

Mantra 7 of the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* refers to the non-dual absolute Self as *Turiya/Caturtha* (the 'Fourth'), the source, support and resolution of the *atman* as manifested in the other three states of consciousness: *Viśva* (wakeful), *Taijasa* (dream) and *Prajña* (deep sleep). *Caturtha* and *Turiya* are synonymous terms; the *Upaniṣad* invokes *Turiya* as 'Caturtha' in order to emphasize the epistemological distinction between this unchanging absolute and the mutable relative conditions of the three states. *Turiya* is distinct from *Viśva*, *Taijasa* and *Prajña* because it is free of their limiting adjuncts (*upadhīs*); and the wakeful, dream and deep sleep conditions are to be understood as discrete transient 'states' only in terms of context, since all three are seamlessly resolved in *Turiya*. The 'Fourth' is not another modality of experience distinct from the other three states – rather, it is their invariable substratum. Strictly speaking, *Turiya* cannot be classified as either a condition (state) or a number (Fourth), since it is entirely beyond categorization and quantification.

⁴ Nikhilananda Swami, *The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad with Gaudapada Karika and Sankara's commentary* trans.(Calcutta:Advaita Ashrama, 2000), 27

Mantra 7 of the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* describes *Turiya* through a litany of descriptors linked through the negative particles *na-* ('non'-) and *a-* ('un'-). *Turiya* is not conscious of the external world (*na-bahiṣprajñam*). It is not conscious of the internal world (*nāntaḥ-prajñam*). It is not the liminal state between the external and internal consciousness (*na-bhayataḥprajñam*), i.e., it negates any intermediate modality between the wakeful and dream states. It is not the undifferentiated consciousness of deep sleep (*na-prajñānaghanam*), i.e., it negates deep sleep, a state of non-discrimination in which truth cannot be distinguished from error; and which is the cause of the wakeful and dream states, both characterized by error. It is not the omniscient, omnipresent cognizer of all things simultaneously (*na prajñam*), i.e., it negates all agency with regard to knowing gross/external and subtle/internal objects; it cannot be categorized as the knower (*pramatr*) of any object. It is not non-conscious (*nāprajñam*), i.e., it negates non-consciousness/insentience (*acaitanyam*). *Turiya* is unseen (*a-dṛṣṭam*). It is autonomous of all empirical transactions (*a-vyavahāryam*). It is ungraspable by the senses (*a-grāhyam*), i.e., it is not an object of sensory perceptions – rather, it is their singular source; and it is also inaccessible to the organs of action. It is without any defining characteristic (*alakṣaṇam*) and without any inferential marker (*alinga*) that would enable its existence to be logically deduced – a process involving subject-object duality – just as the presence of visible smoke enables the inference of unseen fire. It is beyond intellect, thought and concepts (*acintyam*). It cannot be designated by modes of direct communication such as words (*avyapadeśyam*).

Turiya is the essence of the knowledge of one's Self (*ekātmapratyasāram*). It is that into which the entire world gets resolved (*prapañcopaśamaṃ*), i.e., it is the cessation of the phenomenal universe through the complete negation of the attributes of the three states (*sthana-dharma*). Dispassionate, without attachment or aversion, ever blissful, unchanging (*kutastha*), the Fourth comprises all that is peaceful (*śantam*), i.e., without attachment or aversion; auspicious (*śivam*); and non-dual (*advaitam*). It is that which is to be known (*sa vijñeyah*).⁵

The *Mandukya Upaniṣad* uses the method of negation to expound the nature of *Turiya*, since the Fourth transcends all attributes and frameworks of perception: it is trans-empirical, trans-relational and beyond discourse, image and symbol. Through describing *Turiya* as “that which is to be known”, the *Upaniṣad* also affirms that such knowledge entails more than the uncovering the true nature of *atman* through negating all the illusory superimpositions that arise from ignorance and obscure the unchanging substratum. *Turiya* as supreme knowledge entails the irreversible transformation of the knower, who in fact thereafter remains (even while seeming to engage in external activity) as the silent immutable Self, established in his/her own nature (*svarupa-sthiti*) through complete internal detachment from both objective

⁵ *Nāntaḥ-prjñam na bahiṣprājñam nobhayataḥprajñam. naprajñāa ghanam na prajñam nāprajñam adṛṣṭam avyavahāryam agrāhyam alakṣaṇam acintyam avyapadeśyam ekātma-pratyayasāram prapañcopaśamaṃ śāntam śivam advaitam catrutham manyante sa ātmā sa vijñeyah. (The Māndukya Upaniṣad, Mantra.7)*

and subjective worlds. The experience of Self as unchanging witness to the fluctuations of all internal and external phenomena: this is the ‘essence of knowledge’ (*ekātmapratyaysāra*), a positive phrase that like the adjectives *santam*, *sivam* and *advaitam* energizes the flow of negative descriptors that constitute this *mantra*.

When the *Upaniṣad* says that (*Turiya*) is to be known, knowing in this case is not only discovering the Self, but also remaining as the silent immutable Self, remaining in one’s own nature (*svarupa-sthiti*) and losing sight of the objective world. By stating that *Turiya* is *na prajñam*, there is a total denial of *Turiya* as belonging to the category of cognizer (*pramātā*) of objects. Again by saying that it is neither ‘*aprajña*’ it is meant that *Turiya* is not ‘*acetana*’ (insentient). The single positive statement that the three states change, but the Self as a witness remains unchanging as the one essence of knowledge is brought out in the phrase (*ekātmapratyaysāra*). This phrase is amidst a series of negation.

The fact is that the three states, wakeful (*Viśva*), dream (*Taijasa*) deep sleep (*Prājña*) are all adjuncts (*upādhis*) falsely superimposed upon the same Self as a snake, garland, streak of water etc. on the same rope. When these illusory appearances are removed by means of right knowledge, the knowledge of *Turiya* gets accessed. For this reason, no further instrument/means of knowledge such as *yogic* meditation etc. is to be sought for the realization of *Turiya*. The moment one distinguishes between the snake and the rope, the snake perception is corrected and the ever existing rope gets revealed. The knowledge of rope does not require any further proof or any activity. In other words, no additional means (*pramāṇa*) is sought for knowing the rope.

The methodology of negation (*apavada*) to reveal the Self/Consciousness as the inviolable non-dual substratum of the three mutable states incontrovertibly establishes that the *atman* manifesting in *Visva*, *Taijasa* and *Prajna* is *Turiya* itself, ever-present and unchanging. However, the realization of *Turiya* is not an outcome of the application of logic. *Turiya*, being ever-present, is not an object that is attained/reached/achieved by the *jiva* through ceremonial, devotional or intellectual effort, or through any action/ego-catalyzed exertion of will. No instrument of knowledge can act upon or engender *Turiya*, since *Turiya* is supreme knowledge itself, its realization being the complete annulment of the logic of duality/the distinction between knowledge, the knower and the known.

The falsification of the conditioned adjuncts does not lead to a new emergent episteme, to an original result (*phala*) of an established technique of inquiry. Sankara, the commentator of the *Upaniṣad*, gives the example of a jar concealed by darkness: in order to cognize this hidden object, all we require is the instrument of light to reveal the jar as an entity. Nothing else is needed. The illumining of the jar via light/the cognizing of the illumined object by the cognizer are simultaneous processes. In this analogy, light – the sole means adopted to remove the darkness – signifies the metaphysics and methodology of negation that reveals

Turiya through the simultaneous falsification of the three states of waking, dream and deep sleep. It is only through light illumining the hidden jar, enabling its perception by the cognizer, that we are able to know the object as a perceptible, self-existent entity. The jar can be known only when it is illuminated via a source autonomous of the limited knower: light that enables correct cognizing of the object as it actually is. According to Śāṅkara, the absolute falsification of the three states is the only valid means of attaining the supreme knowledge that is ever-present non-dual Consciousness – he terms this method “*pratiśedha vijñānarūpa pramāṇa*”.

Mantra 7 distills the totality of negative and positive descriptors of *Turiya* into two resonant axiomatic claims: *Turiya* is “*ekatmapratyayasara*” (‘its sole essence is non-dual Self/Consciousness’) and “*sa vijneyah*” (‘that which is to be known’). The phrase “*ekatmapratyayasara*”, a generic declaration, is intended to show that *Turiya*, the unified ‘Fourth’, is not a quantifiable/empirical modality like the other three states; and to show that while it can only be accessed through the logic of *apavada*, it refutes nihilism, the inevitable end-point of epistemological negation, since *Turiya* (the ever-present and immutable substratum of the three mutable states) cannot be equated with *sunya* (pure void/emptiness/nothingness/non-existence). Self/Consciousness is what remains when the entire phenomenal world (*prapanca*) has been entirely negated.

The phrase “*sa vijneya*” in relation to *Turiya* is enunciated from the standpoint of the *jiva*’s earlier condition of ignorance: when the Self is realized, all dualisms/discursive binaries (absolute and relative, illusion and reality, transcendental and existential, ignorance and knowledge, non-self and self, aversion and attachment, gross and subtle, speech and silence, etc.) simultaneously cease to exist. As earlier mentioned, *Turiya* annuls all distinction between the limited knower, this knower’s limited knowledge and the unlimited field of what exists to be known. To know the non-dual Self is to always distinguish, in all circumstances, mutable superimposition from immutable substratum – in metaphorical terms, to always correctly distinguish the apparent snake from the actual rope. This concluding instruction of *Mantra 7* thus links the teachings of the *Mandukya Upanisad* to other *Sruti* utterances on the Self, such as the all-encompassing *Mahavakya* “*Tat tvam asi*” (‘thou art That’) which signifies the manifestation of ultimate knowledge as well as the trajectory and nature of “the unseen seer” (*BU. 3.7.23*), “the seer whose power of seeing never comes to be lost” (*BU. 4.3.3.23-30*).(53) This unchanging, inviolable seer, steadily true within the duplicitous fluctuating continuum of the three states, is to be “meditated upon as *ātman*, as the Self” (*BU.1.4.7*).⁶

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* declares that the Self is to be equated with the syllable *aum*. The four letters (*mātrās*) of *aum* correspond to the four quarters (*pādas*) of the Self.⁷ The three audible/spoken letters (*mātrās*) are a, u, m and they arise from the fourth which is unspoken/non-sound called (non-letter). In writing, *amātra* is represented by the point

⁶ Som Raj Gupta, *The World Speaks to the Faustian Man*, Vol II, (Delhi :Motilal Banarsidass , 1995),212

⁷ *Pāda Mātrā mātrās ca pādaḥ, Māndukya Upanisad, Mantra 8.*

(*bindu*) of the *anusvāra*. The principle of the meditation on *aum* prescribed by the *āgama* or scripture is to equate the letters (*mātrās*) of *aum* with the quarters (*pādas*) of the Self.

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad exhorts the contemplation upon *aum* as a means for the realisation of Self/*Turīya*. Contemplation upon *aum* simply does not involve the repetition of the syllable *aum*. It is not a meditation in the *yogic* sense having the total suspension of cognition (*cittavṛttinirodha*). It rather adopts a method wherein the contemplator (*sādhaka*) has the knowledge of the equivalence of the three syllables of *aum* and the three states of experience. He also knows the identity of the silent source of the three syllables called, ‘*amātra*’ with *Turīya* which is the source, support and point of resolution of the three states. Such a contemplation functions as a means to help the direct understanding that: ‘I am the *Turīya*’. So, the *Upaniṣad* says: ‘*aum* is indeed the Self’. In this respect, the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* discovers a new and unique stage/phase in the development of the teaching as well as in the technique for its experiential realization.

Those who have the right knowledge that Consciousness is unborn (*aja*) and uniform (*sama*), are indeed the people of Highest wisdom. Highest wisdom constitutes the knowledge of the Self. The Self and Knowledge (*jñānam*) are inseparable, just as the sun is inseparable from its light and heat. The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* demonstrates the nature of Self/Consciousness as the ultimate self-luminous principle. The Self is Knowledge itself. The Self, the Knower of Self, and the Knowledge of Self, are all one and the same. Knowing the Self is like perceiving Consciousness in Consciousness.

In the contemporary world, torn apart by caste, creed, gender and religious differences, an understanding of the nature of the non-dual Consciousness stands as a statement of hope, as an injunction to live a just and virtuous life, to pursue higher knowledge and to transcend the delusion of both the “other” and suffering.