



Ātmasvarūpam and Human Consciousness: A Study Based on the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad.

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Abstract

The Upanishads form the foundation of Indian philosophy and teach spiritual monism and mysticism. The various systems of Indian philosophy are systematic speculations on the nature of Reality, developed in harmony with the teachings of the Upanishads, which present different aspects of truth. Their aim is the realization of Reality and the spiritual transformation of human life. Philosophical knowledge does not merely satisfy theoretical and speculative curiosity; it seeks the realization of the highest truth in life.

Indian philosophy is essentially spiritual in nature. In India, philosophy and religion are intimately connected. Religion is not merely a system of dogmas but a living experience and the practical realization of spiritual truth. Philosophy is the theoretical understanding of Reality, while religion is its experiential realization. Thus, Indian philosophy is not mere intellectual speculation but a spiritual quest. The term Darśana literally means “vision,” signifying an insight into Reality as a whole.

The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad is one of the shortest yet most profound Upanishads in Indian philosophical literature. Belonging to the Vedānta tradition, it presents a deep analysis of the nature of the Self (Ātman) through the symbol of Om. Although it consists of only twelve mantras, it offers a comprehensive philosophical vision of Reality and consciousness. The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad presents a profound conception of Ātmasvarūpa as pure, non-dual consciousness. Through an analysis of the four states of experience—waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and Turīya—it guides the seeker toward the realization of the ultimate Reality. This realization leads to mokṣa (liberation), freeing the individual from the cycle of birth and death.

Keywords: Ātmasvarūpam, Human Consciousness, Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, Turīya. Waking State (Jāgrat), Dream State (Svapna), Deep Sleep State (Suṣupti), Upanishadic Philosophy,

Spiritual Awareness.

Introduction

The word Upanishad comes from upa ni sad, "sitting down near." It means sitting down near " the teacher to receive instruction, it gradually came to mean what we receive from the teacher, a sort of secret doctrine or rahasyam, sometimes it is made to mean what enables us to destroy error, and approach truth. Śamkara, in his introduction to the Taittirīya Upanishad, says: "Knowledge of Brahman is called Upanishad because in the case of those who devote themselves to it, the bonds of conception, birth, decay, etc., become unloosed, or because it destroys them altogether, or because it leads the pupil very near to Brahman, or because therein the highest God is seated.'

The Upanishads form the concluding portions of the Veda, and are therefore called the Veda-anta, or the end of the Veda, a denomination which suggests that they contain the essence of the Vedic teaching. They are the foundations on which most of the later philosophies and religions of India rest. There is no important form of Hindu thought, heterodox Buddhism included, which is not rooted in the Upanishads."

The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad is the shortest of the major Upaniṣads, consisting of only 12 mantras. It explains the nature of the Self (Ātman), Brahman, and the significance of the sacred syllable Om (ॐ). It offers a comprehensive philosophical vision of Reality and consciousness. The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad presents a profound conception of Ātmasvarūpa as pure, non-dual consciousness. Through an analysis of the four states of experience—waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and Turīya—it guides the seeker toward the realization of

the Ultimate Reality. This realization leads to mokṣa (liberation), freeing the individual from the cycle of birth and death.

Indian philosophy is based on logical reason subordinate to the authority of the Vedas, which are believed to embody the intuitions of the seers of truth. The authority of the Vedas is that of intuition. Logical reason is subordinate to intuition. So Indian philosophy is based on rational speculation in harmony with the Vedas, and consciously aims at achieving the highest perfection (mokṣa) attainable in human life.

Principal Upanishads

The Upanishads constitute the philosophical culmination of the Vedas and are therefore known as Vedānta ("the end of the Vedas"). They explore the nature of reality, the self (Ātman), the ultimate principle (Brahman), knowledge, liberation, and the purpose of human life. Among the numerous Upanishads, ten are traditionally regarded as the principal Upanishads due to the commentaries written on them by Adi Shankaracharya. Īśā Upaniṣad, Kena Upaniṣad, Kaṭha Upaniṣad, Praśna Upaniṣad, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Aitareya Upaniṣad, Chāndogya Upaniṣad, Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad.

Fundamental Philosophical Concepts

1. Brahman – The Ultimate Reality-The Upanishads proclaim Brahman as the supreme, infinite, eternal reality underlying the universe. Brahman is described as the source, sustenance, and end of all existence. "Sarvaṃ khalvidam brahma" – "All this is indeed Brahman." (Chāndogya Upaniṣad)

2. Ātman – The Inner Self-The Upanishads teach that the true self is not the body or mind but the immortal Ātman. Self-realization is the key to spiritual freedom.

3. Identity of Ātman and Brahman-The central teaching of the Upanishads is the essential unity of the individual self and the universal reality.

Mahāvākyas:

"Tat Tvam Asi" – You are that or Thou art that (Chāndogya)

"Aham Brahmāsmi" – I am Brahman (Bṛhadāraṇyaka)

"Prajñānam Brahma" – Consciousness is Brahman (Aitareya)

"Ayam Ātmā Brahma" – This Self is Brahman (Māṇḍūkya)

4. Knowledge (Jñāna) as the Means to Liberation-Ignorance (Avidyā) causes bondage, while true knowledge (Brahmavidyā) leads to liberation (Mokṣa).

5. Karma and Rebirth-Human actions produce consequences that determine future births. Liberation transcends the cycle of birth and death.

6. Mokṣa – The Supreme Goal-The ultimate aim of life is liberation through realization of one's true nature as Brahman.

Philosophical Contributions of Major Upanishads

Īśā Upaniṣad-Harmony of action and knowledge. Divine presence in all beings. Renunciation and detachment.

Kena Upaniṣad-Nature of consciousness. Brahman as the power behind mind and senses.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad-Dialogue between Naciketā and Yama. Immortality of the soul. Distinction between Śreyas (good) and Preyas (pleasant).

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad-Higher knowledge (Parā Vidyā) and lower knowledge (Aparā Vidyā).

Realization of Brahman as the highest wisdom.

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad-Analysis of consciousness through waking, dream, deep sleep, and Turīya. Explanation of Om (Praṇava) as the symbol of Brahman.

Taittirīya Upaniṣad-Doctrine of the five sheaths (Pañcakośa). Bliss (Ānanda) as the nature of Brahman.

Chāndogya Upaniṣad-Teaching of "Tat Tvam Asi." Unity of existence.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad-Doctrine of the Self. "Neti, Neti" (Not this, not this). "Aham Brahmāsmi."

Upanishadic philosophy represents the highest achievement of ancient Indian thought. It seeks to answer fundamental questions concerning the nature of reality, the self, and liberation. Through the realization of the identity of Ātman and Brahman, the Upanishads teach the attainment of Mokṣa, the supreme state of freedom, peace, and immortality. Their teachings continue to influence Indian philosophy, spirituality, and religious traditions throughout the world.

Ātmasvarūpam in the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad

The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad presents an analysis of consciousness that leads to the realization of the true nature of the Self (Ātman). According to the Upaniṣad, the soul experiences three states of consciousness, all of which are included in a fourth state known as Turīya. These states are waking (jāgrat), dreaming (svapna), and deep sleep (suṣupti). The first state is that of wakefulness, in which the self is conscious of the external world and experiences gross objects. In this state, dependence on the body is predominant. The second state is the dream state, where the self enjoys subtle objects and creates a world of forms from the impressions gathered during waking experience. The spirit is said to roam freely, unfettered by the limitations of the physical body.

The third state is that of deep sleep (suṣupti), in which there are neither dreams nor desires. The soul is said to become temporarily united with Brahman and to experience bliss. In deep sleep, one rises above desires and is freed from mental disturbances. The oppositions and dualities created by the mind disappear in this state of pure, objectless awareness.

Śaṅkarācārya observes that the phenomena of duality caused by the activity of the mind are present in the waking and dream states but absent in deep sleep. Several passages of the Upaniṣads suggest that in dreamless sleep we experience a reflection of absolute bliss, detached from the distractions of the external world. Although the soul is divine in origin, its true nature is obscured by ignorance. The realization of Turīya, the fourth state, reveals the identity of Ātman and Brahman, which is the central teaching of the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad.

The three ordinary states of human experience:

Waking state (Jāgrat) – where we experience the external world.

Dream state (Svapna) – where the mind creates its own world of experiences.

Deep sleep state (Suṣupti) – where there is no distinct awareness of objects, either internal or external. Both waking and dream experiences are relative and limited. Deep sleep is a state in which all distinctions disappear, but it is not the ultimate reality because there is still ignorance or unconsciousness. The Fourth State (Turīya). Turīya is neither waking, dreaming, nor deep sleep. It is the witness-consciousness that transcends all three states. The Upaniṣads describe it mainly through negative terms ("not this, not this") because ordinary language and concepts cannot fully express its true nature. Ātman is not mere emptiness or nothingness. It is positive bliss (ānanda) and pure consciousness. Human beings, being finite, cannot completely define or describe this ultimate reality. The Upaniṣads reject the idea that the highest reality is a blank void. Atman is the fullest and most complete reality, beyond all limitations and disturbances. Finally, the question of the Self became a central theme in Indian philosophy. Different thinkers such as Buddha, Śaṅkara, Kapila, and Patañjali offered different interpretations of the Self, but the Upaniṣads consistently present Ātman as the highest reality and pure consciousness. The true Self (Ātman) is the transcendent, ever-present consciousness (Turīya) that witnesses the waking, dream, and deep-sleep states. It is not emptiness but the highest reality, characterized by pure consciousness, peace, and bliss.

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad – Explanation of the 12 Mantras

This is the third Principal Upaniṣad of the Atharvaveda. The smallest among the Ten Principal Upaniṣads, the reputation given by orientalists is very high. It consists of twelve Mantras. The mystic letter 'OM'

undergoes special treatment as Brahman or Atman in this Upanisad. One of the four great Upanisadic Principal Sentences (Mahavakyas), "AYAMATMA BRAHMA" (This self is Brahman), is uttered in this text. The patronage of the Upanisad goes to the sage Māṇḍūkya, and thus the text is called Mandukyopanisad.

मन्त्रः १

ॐ इत्येतदक्षरमिदं सर्वं तस्योपव्याख्यानं भूतं
भवद्भविष्यदिति सर्वमोङ्कार एव ।
यच्चात्यल्लिकालातीतं तदप्योङ्कार एव ॥

The syllable *Aum* represents everything that exists—past, present, and future. Even that which transcends time is symbolized by *aum*. *Aum* is the universal sound that encompasses all existence. It is the verbal symbol of the Absolute Reality. The syllable *aum*, which is the symbol of Brahman, stands for the manifested world, the past, the present and the future, as well as the unmanifested Absolute.

मन्त्रः २

सर्वं ह्येतद्ब्रह्मायमात्मा ब्रह्म सोऽयमात्मा चतुष्पात्
॥

All this is Brahman. This Self (Ātman) is Brahman. This Self has four quarters (states). The individual self and the universal reality are essentially one. The Upanisad introduces the four states of consciousness.

All this is, verily, Brahman. This self is Brahman. This same self has four quarters. Four quarters: which are *viśva*, the waking state; *taijasa*, the dream state; *prājña*, the state of dreamless sleep; and *turiya*, which is the state of spiritual consciousness. The knowledge of the

fourth is attained by merging the previous three such as *viśva*, etc., in the order of the previous one in the succeeding one.

मन्त्रः ३

जागरितस्थानो बहिष्प्रज्ञः सप्ताङ्गः
एकोनविंशतिमुखः स्थूलभुग्वैश्वानरः प्रथमः पादः
॥

The first state is *Vaiśvānara*, the waking state, in which consciousness is directed outward and experiences the physical world. In the waking state, we perceive external objects through the senses. This is the gross level of experience.

Nineteen mouths: are the five organs of sense (hearing, touch, sight, taste and smell), the five organs of action (speech, handling, locomotion, generation and excretion), the five vital breaths, the mind (*manas*), the intellect (*buddhi*), the self-sense (*aham-kāra*), and thought (*citta*).

The walking state is the normal condition of the normal condition of the natural man, who without reflection accepts the universe as he finds it. The same physical universe bound by uniform laws presents itself to all such men.

मन्त्रः ४

स्वप्नस्थानोऽन्तःप्रज्ञः सप्ताङ्गः एकोनविंशतिमुखः
प्रविविक्तभुक्तैजसो द्वितीयः पादः ॥

The second state is *Taijasa*, the dream state, where consciousness turns inward and experiences subtle objects. Dreams are mental creations. The dreamer experiences an inner world independent of external sensory input.

The *taijasa* is conscious of the internal, i.e., mental states. While the *viśva*, which is the

subject of the waking state, cognises material objects in the waking experience, the taijasa experiences mental states dependent on the predispositions left by the waking experiences. In this state the soul fashions its own world in the imagining of the dreams. "The spirit serves as light for itself". Here also the basis of duality operates, the one that knows and the object that is known. Though from the standpoint of the dream, the dream objects are experienced as external, they are said to be subtle because they are different from the objects of the waking state which are external. The Upaniṣad makes a clear distinction between waking and dream experiences.

मन्त्रः ५

यत्र सुप्तो न कञ्चन कामं कामयते न कञ्चन स्वप्नं पश्यति तत्सुषुप्तम् । सुषुप्तस्थान एकीभूतः प्रज्ञानघन एवानन्दमयो ह्यानन्दभुक्चेतोमुखः प्राज्ञस्तृतीयः पादः ॥

The third state is Prājña, deep sleep, where there are no desires or dreams. In deep sleep, all mental activities cease. There are peace and bliss, but no awareness of duality.

मन्त्रः ६

एष सर्वेश्वर एष सर्वज्ञ एषोऽन्तर्याम्येष योनिः सर्वस्य प्रभवाप्ययौ हि भूतानाम् ॥

This Prājña is the Lord of all, the knower of all, the inner controller, and the source of creation and dissolution. Deep sleep points toward the causal state from which all experiences arise and into which they return.

मन्त्रः ७

नान्तःप्रज्ञं न बहिःप्रज्ञं नोभयतःप्रज्ञं न प्रज्ञानघनं न प्रज्ञं नाप्रज्ञम् ।
अदृष्टमव्यवहार्यमग्राह्यमलक्षणमचिन्त्यमव्यपदे श्यमेकात्मप्रत्ययसारं प्रपञ्चोपशमं शान्तं शिवमद्वैतं चतुर्थं मन्यन्ते स आत्मा स विज्ञेयः ॥

The Fourth state (Turīya) is neither inwardly conscious nor outwardly conscious, neither both nor unconscious. Turīya transcends waking, dream, and deep sleep. It is pure consciousness, non-dual, peaceful, auspicious, and the true Self.

मन्त्रः ८

सोऽयमात्माध्यक्षरमोङ्कारोऽधिमात्रं पादा मात्रामात्राश्च पादा अकार उकारो मकार इति ॥

The Self is *aum*. The four quarters of the Self correspond to the components of Om: A, U, M, and the silence beyond. The Upaniṣad now connects the four states of consciousness with the syllable Om.

मन्त्रः ९

जागरितस्थानो वैश्वानरोऽकारः प्रथमामात्रा आप्तेरादिमत्त्वाद्वा आप्नोति ह वै सर्वान्कामानादिश्च भवति य एवं वेद ॥

The waking state (Vaiśvānara) corresponds to the letter A. "A" is the beginning of all sounds, just as the waking state is the first and most commonly experienced state.

मन्त्रः १०

स्वप्नस्थानस्तैजस उकारो द्वितीया मात्रा उत्कर्षादुभयत्वाद्वोत्कर्षति ह वै ज्ञानसन्ततिं समानश्च भवति नास्याब्रह्मवित्कुले भवति य एवं वेद ॥

The dream state (Taijasa) corresponds to the letter U. "U" stands between A and M,

just as the dream state lies between waking and deep sleep.

मन्त्रः ११

सुषुप्तस्थानः प्राज्ञो मकारस्तृतीया मात्रा
मितेरपीतेर्वा मिनोति ह वा इदं सर्वमपीतिश्च
भवति य एवं वेद ॥

The deep sleep state (Prājña) corresponds to the letter M."M" signifies absorption and completion, just as all experiences merge into deep sleep.

मन्त्रः १२

अमात्रश्चतुर्थोऽव्यवहार्यः प्रपञ्चोपशमः शिवोऽद्वैत
एवमोङ्कार आत्मैव । संविशत्यात्मनात्मानं य एवं
वेद ॥

The Fourth (Turīya) is beyond all letters and sounds. It is peace, auspiciousness, and non-duality. The silence after the chanting of Om symbolizes Turīya. One who realizes this state realizes the true Self and attains liberation.

Analysis of Consciousness

The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad explains the nature of the Self (Ātman) through an analysis of consciousness. It belongs to the Atharva Veda and contains twelve verses. It is an exposition of the principle of aum as consisting of three elements, a, u, m, which refer to the three states of waking, dream and dreamless sleep. The Supreme Self is manifested in the universe in its gross, subtle and causal aspects. Answering to the four states of consciousness, wakefulness, dream, dreamless sleep, transcendental consciousness, there are aspects of the Godhead, the last alone being all-inclusive and ultimately real. The Absolute of mystic consciousness is the reality of the

God of religion. The Upaniṣad by itself, it is said, is enough to lead one to liberation. *māṇḍūkyaṃ ekam evālaṃ mumukṣūṇāṃ vimuktaye.*

Four States of Consciousness

Jāgrat (Waking State) – Awareness of external objects; experience of the gross world. Svapna (Dream State) – Experience of subtle objects created by the mind. Suṣupti (Deep Sleep State) – Absence of desires and dreams; experience of bliss and unity. Turīya (The Fourth State) – The transcendental state beyond the other three.

Nature of Suṣupti

Duality disappears in deep sleep. The individual enjoys bliss and temporary unity with Brahman. Mental modifications cease.

Śaṅkara's Interpretation

Duality exists in waking and dream states but not in deep sleep. Deep sleep reveals a reflection of the blissful nature of the Self. Turīya as the Highest Reality. Beyond waking, dreaming, and sleeping. Pure consciousness without subject-object distinction. Eternal, peaceful, non-dual, and indescribable.

Ātman and Brahman

The Upaniṣad teaches the identity of Ātman and Brahman. Realization of this identity is liberation.

Symbolism of Om (AUM)

A – Waking state (Viśv a). U – Dream state (Taijasa). M – Deep sleep state (Prājña). Silence after AUM – Turīya

Characteristics of Ātman

Eternal and unchanging. Witness of all experiences. Foundation of all existence. Infinite consciousness and bliss.

Philosophical Importance

Forms the basis of Advaita Vedānta. Influenced later Indian philosophical systems. Central doctrine of self-realization.

Ātmasvarūpam in the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad – A Psychological Approach

The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad offers a remarkably sophisticated analysis of human consciousness. When viewed through a psychological lens, it can be understood as an early model of the structure and functioning of the mind. The concept of Ātmasvarūpa (true Self) is explained through four states of consciousness, which correspond to different layers of mental experience.

1. Waking State (Jāgrat) – Conscious Mind

In the waking state (Vaiśvānara), the individual interacts with the external world through the senses. Psychologically, this corresponds to the conscious mind, where perception, reasoning, and active thinking take place.

- Awareness is outward-directed
- Engagement with real-world stimuli
- Ego (ahaṅkāra) is dominant

This is similar to what modern psychology describes as objective awareness or surface consciousness.

2. Dream State (Svapna) – Subconscious Mind

In the dream state (Taijasa), the mind turns inward and creates its own experiences without external input.

- Thoughts, memories, and impressions (saṁskāras) appear as dreams
- The mind functions independently of sensory input
- Emotional and symbolic processing occurs

This resembles the subconscious mind, where hidden desires and impressions influence mental activity. It parallels ideas in Sigmund Freud's theory of dreams as expressions of inner मानसिक content.

3. Deep Sleep (Suṣupti) – Unconscious State

In deep sleep (Prājña), there is no active mental content—no thoughts, no desires, no dreams.

- Complete absence of duality (subject-object distinction)
- State of rest and latent awareness
- Ignorance (avidyā) remains

Psychologically, this aligns with the unconscious state, where mental processes are inactive or unmanifest. However, unlike ordinary unconsciousness, the Upaniṣad emphasizes a subtle presence of bliss and potential awareness.

4. Turīya – Pure Consciousness (Transcendental Self)

Turīya is the most significant concept in the psychological interpretation. It is not a “state” in the usual sense, but the

background awareness underlying all mental states.

- Beyond conscious, subconscious, and unconscious
- Non-dual awareness without subject-object division
- Witness consciousness (sākṣin)

Modern psychology has no exact equivalent, but it resembles ideas in transpersonal psychology and concepts like pure awareness or meta-consciousness. It is the observing self that remains constant across all experiences.

Psychological Significance of Ātmasvarūpa

- Encourages self-awareness beyond thoughts and emotions
- Helps detach from ego-based identity
- Promotes mental peace by recognizing the transient nature of mental states
- Suggests a path toward inner integration and stability

This approach aligns with modern practices like mindfulness and meditation, where observing the mind leads to deeper psychological clarity. From a psychological perspective, the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad presents an advanced theory of consciousness. Human awareness progresses through different levels—from external awareness to deeper inner experiences—and finally reaches Turīya, the transcendental state of consciousness. Turīya is described as the true nature of the Self (Ātman), which is not the mind or its changing thoughts but the pure

consciousness that witnesses all experiences.

Conclusion.

Vedānta is a major school of Hindu philosophy based on the concluding sections of the Vedas, namely the Upanishads. It explores the nature of ultimate reality (Brahman), the individual self (Ātman), and liberation (Mokṣa). Among the Upanishads, the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad occupies a unique position by presenting Ātman as the ultimate reality underlying all states of consciousness. Through the realization of Turīya, one understands the non-dual identity of Ātman and Brahman, which constitutes the central teaching of Advaita Vedānta. By understanding the four states of consciousness and the symbolism of Om, one realizes the non-dual Self, the ultimate reality. From a psychological perspective, the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad offers an advanced theory of consciousness, describing a progression from external awareness to deeper inner states and finally to transcendental awareness. The concept of Ātmasvarūpa as Turīya reveals that the true Self is not the mind but the pure consciousness that witnesses all mental states. This insight provides both philosophical depth and practical relevance for understanding human consciousness and the nature of the self. It seeks to answer fundamental questions concerning the nature of reality, the self, and liberation. Through the realization of the identity between Atman and Brahman, the Upanishads teach the attainment of Moska, the supreme state of freedom, peace, and immortality. Their teachings continue to influence Indian philosophy, spirituality,

and religious traditions throughout the world.

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