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Consciousness in Upanishads

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Abstract:

Upanishads are the fountain head of Indian cultural and spiritual knowledge as contemplated and visualized by our ancient sages and seers. Initially they were handed down for generations as oral tradition through preceptors - disciples in *gurukula* tradition as secret knowledge (*raja guhyam*), later was documented in Sanskrit language, one of the oldest language in the world. They were called as *Vedanta* as they came at the end of the Vedas, which are a compendium of ancient cultural, social and spiritual thoughts. Hence upanishadic thoughts are universal in their appeal and catholic in approach. They belong to the whole world. A serious study and practical implementation of upanishadic thoughts by any human being will lead one to physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual happiness in this world and a person can escape the cycles of birth and death leading to final liberation (*moksha*). The Upanishads speak both of 'within' and 'without' of things. One of the most important concept embedded in the Upanishads is the Consciousness. It is called as *chit*, *prajna*, *chaitanya* or *Brahman*. This paper reviews the concept of consciousness as explained in the principle ten Upanishads. It also brings about the types of consciousness as elaborated in *Mandukyopanishad*. The four states of consciousness namely waking (*jagrat*), dream (*svapnam*), deep sleep (*sushupti*) and *turiya* or fourth are analysed here as per Gaudapada's *Karika* on *Mandukyopanishad*. It also brings about the transcendental consciousness (*samadhi*) as experienced by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the final spiritual goal of seekers.

Keywords: Atman, Brahman, consciousness, dream, deep sleep, transcendental consciousness, turiya, waking

Introduction

Upanishads are the fountainhead of ancient Indian spiritual knowledge as visualized or introspected and documented by our ancient sages and seers. As they come at the end of the Vedas, they are called *Vedanta*. Upanishad means sitting close to a teacher and learning the secret knowledge (*raja guhyam*, *rajavidyam*). Indian tradition mentions 360 Upanishads of which 108 have been preserved. Shankaracharya recognizes 16 Upanishads as authentic and authoritative in nature. He quotes six Upanishads while writing commentary on Brahmasutras. Further he has written elaborate commentaries on other ten Upanishads (*Isha*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prashna*, *Munda*, *Mandukya*, *Tittiri*, *Aitareya*, *Chandogya* and *Brihadaranyaka*). All the Upanishads inform that this secret knowledge of one's own self should be learnt under the guidance of a preceptor (*guru* or *acharya*). These are in the form of dialogues, verses, prose passages and deal with the subjects such as nature of individual self (*Atman*), universal self (*Brahman*), universe (*jagat*), their inter-relationships, performance of duties, observance of high moral - ethical values and spiritual discipline, control of sense organs and mind, faith in oneself and supreme reality, states of consciousness, practice of meditation and *omkara*, concept of death and ways and means of attaining liberation (*moksha*). Sometimes *Brahman* or supreme reality is also called by other names such as *Parabrahman* (ultimate reality), *chaitanya* or *prajna* (consciousness) or transcendental consciousness (*samadhi*).

Brahman in Upanishads

According to our ancient Indian sages, universe is dynamic in nature and forms part and parcel of *Brahman*, the ultimate reality. Sometimes universe is referred to as body and *Brahman* as soul. In the same way, they explain that *Brahman* resides in the body of all beings. *Ishavasyopanishad* says: 'In the heart of all things, of whatever there is in the universe, dwells the Lord' (*Isha.I*).

Brahman is the indwelling life, light, force, energy and resides in the Universe (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6]. Thus *Brahman*, human beings and universe are interconnected as told by *Kena Upanishad*: 'This is the truth of *Brahman* in relation to people: in the movement of the mind, the power that is shown is the power of *Brahman*' (IV.5). This *Brahman* is self – luminous (*svayam prakasha*), dwells in the hearts of all. As *Mundaka Upanishad* declares: '*Brahman* is subtler than the subtlest, all the worlds exist in him. He is the principle of life and imperishable and immortal in nature. The final goal of all human beings is to attain Him' (*Mu.Up.* II. 11. 1-2). *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* solves the apparent duality of realities by identifying *Brahman* with the universe as occurring in a passage thus: 'You are the dark butterfly, you are the green parrot with red eyes, you are the thunder cloud, the seasons, seas, you are without beginning, beyond space and time. From you sprang the three worlds' (*Sh. Up.*IV.2-4).

In a fascinating dialogue in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, sage Yajnavalkya while replying to a question by his wife Maitreyi resolves the dualistic reality of the world or *Brahman* by suggesting her to meditate on the truth which is the illuminated soul as explained to her thus: 'As long as there is duality, one sees the other, one hears the other, one smells the other, one speaks to the other, one thinks of the other, one knows the other. But when for the illumined soul, the all is dissolved in the Self, who is there to be seen by whom, who is there to be smelt by whom, who is there to be heard by whom, who is there to be spoken to by whom, who is there to be thought by whom, who is there to be known by whom? This Self is incomprehensible, non-decaying, unattached and unbound' (*Br.Up.*IV.V.14-15). The *Chandogya Upanishad* announces that there is no modification or transformation of reality in the world and it only occurs in words or speech and says that clay alone is real and all its modifications are unreal. To quote: 'In words or speech alone, the modification originates and exists. In reality there is no such thing as modification. It is merely a name and the clay alone is real' (*mruttiketyeva satyam - Ch.Up.* IV.i.5). The *Aitareya Aranyaka* explains that this *Atman* or *Brahman* exists in all the sentient and non-sentient beings of the world. But in human beings, it exhibits well (II.ii.1-5) and declares that pure consciousness is *Brahman* (*Prajnanam Brahma - III.11.1-5*). Yama, the god of death while answering to Nachiketas about the nature of *Atman*, tells that this consciousness or *Atman* is present 'within' us and 'without'. One who knows the difference between these two transcends the cycles of birth and death. To quote: 'The wise man who sees him revealed in his own soul, to him belongs eternal peace: to none else, to none else' (*Katha.Up.*II.iv.10, V.12). *Prashnopanishad* emphasizes on observance of moral and spiritual disciplines, practice of life or psychic force (*prana*) for attaining ultimate reality.

States of Consciousness

The *Mandukya Upanishad* explains three states of consciousness and also the fourth called, *turiya* which is a transcendental state also known as *samadhi*. (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6]. In a fascinating story of Indra and Prajapati in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, Indra learns about the three states of consciousness which are waking (*jagrat*), dream (*svapnam*) and deep sleep (*sushupti*) - *Cha. Up.* VIII.vii.1-3, VIII.viii.1-5, ix.1-2, xi.1-2, xii.1-5.) Deep sleep raises above physical consciousness and is distinct from senses and the mind (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6]. People experience

the first three states everyday which is ordinary in nature. *Turiya* is called the highest state or supreme state of consciousness or the fourth state which can be experienced only through hard practice and introspection. This state has no connection with the finite mind (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6]. Upanishads declare that, it is a state of knowledge and liberation and also as the supreme goal of spiritual life. The experience of *turiya* frees oneself from ignorance (*avidya*), shackles of birth (*janma*), death (*marana*) and rebirth (*punarjanma*). The spiritual aspirant after sustained effort gets spiritual freedom. According to *Taittiriya Upanishad*, the consciousness is present in the fifth sheath called *Anandamaya kosha* which is nearest to the blissful self (Sharvananda, Swami, 1989) ^[9].

Gaudapada in his *Mandukyakarika* elaborates on four states of consciousness and especially the *turiya*. The first is the waking state (*jagrat*) or gross state in which we are aware of external things, have sensuous enjoyments of all gross objects and are convinced about our physical bodies. A person in this state is called *vaishvanara* as he is the lord of this physical body. Through seven instruments and nineteen channels (1), he experiences the gross objects of the phenomenal world.

The second is dream state (*svapnam*) or subtle state which is called as *taijasa* as he is aware of the internal phenomena and enjoys mental impressions. It also operates through seven instruments and nineteen channels, which engage the subtle objects of the mental realm. This is an intermediate state between waking and deep sleep. Here the mind is fully active and independent of sense organs and is not aware of the physical body. Man is purely a mental being in this state. The third is the deep sleep state (*sushupti*) or the causal state. A person is called *prajna* in this state. In this state, there is neither desire for gross nor subtle subjects, nor any dream sequences. He is completely unaware of the external and internal worlds. "All experiences have receded or merged into undifferentiated consciousness. Ignorance in deep sleep covers up consciousness, and thoughts and knowledge apparently vanish. With this third state we reach ego or 'causal sheath', so called because it contains the root of ignorance" (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6]. Gaudapada says that deep sleep does not know about the *Atman* or self or non - *Atman* or non-self, either of truth or non-truth. Dream and deep sleep are wrong apprehensions of reality. When this false experience disappears in dream and deep sleep, *turiya* is realized (*Gaudapada karika* I. 7. 12 and 15). He further says that mind in deep sleep is disciplined and withdrawn but in *turiya*, it is not withdrawn. Any person whose mind is disciplined unites with *Brahman*, who is fearless and the light of knowledge shines in all directions (*Ibid*, III. 35).

Turiya - Fourth state of Consciousness

The fourth is called *turiya* which transcends the previous three states. It is described in *Mandukyopanishad* thus: 'The Fourth aspect of *Atman* or self is *turiya*. Literally the fourth. In this fourth state, the consciousness is neither turned outward nor inward. Nor is it both outward and inward: it is beyond both cognition and the absence of cognition. This fourth state of *turiya* cannot be experienced through the senses or known by comparison, deductive reasoning or inference: it is indescribable, incomprehensible, and unthinkable with the mind. This is pure consciousness itself. This is the real self. It is within the cessation of all phenomena. It is serene, tranquil, filled with bliss, and is one without a second. This is the real or true self that is to be realized' (SVYASA). *Turiya*, the fourth, is in short, the

supreme mystic experience and when a spiritual seeker harnesses his *kundalini chakras* and when he reaches the seventh *chakra* in the centre of the brain called *sahasrara*, *samadhi* occurs which is transcendental consciousness and in that he realizes oneness with God (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6]. It is symbolized by silence and the mystic *mantra AUM*. This state is the final goal for a spiritual seeker and Upanishads consider it as a state of knowledge and also as liberation. When one attains this state, he is free from the meshes of ignorance, cycle of birth and death as told by Shankaracharya and he gains absolute freedom of the soul (2). While the first three states are related to three dimensional form of empirical experience, fourth state or *turiya* is a four dimensional reality or even can be called as a dimensionless experience.

According to Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a person who has experienced this state does not see plurality of universe. The first three states dissolve in *turiya*. To quote: "When, having attained the non-dual *Brahman* in *samadhi*, one comes back to the plane of the ego; one realizes that, it is *Brahman* who has become this universe of plurality. To get to the flesh of the fruit you discard its skin and seeds. But when you want to know the total weight of the fruit, you must weigh them all together. The skin, the seeds, the flesh - all belong to the one and same fruit. Similarly, having realized the unchangeable reality - the one absolute, formless, impersonal, infinite God is again one with the relative universe. He who is absolute in one aspect is relative in another aspect, and both aspects belong to one and the same substance'(Ramakrishna *kathamrta*). According to Swami Prabhavananda, concept of *nirvana* of Buddhists and *turiya* of the Upanishads appear to be identical as both are beyond subject and object, of observer or knower, beyond spacio - temporality, cause-effect relations. They are consciousness by themselves, and beyond flux and relativity. They can be attained by normal consciousness but can be experienced by the control of mind and sub-conscious mind and only through self - restraint and meditation (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6]. A spiritual person who has attained *turiya* later need not be concerned too much about moral laws. As *Mundaka Upanishad* says: "When the seer beholds the Effulgent One, the Lord, the Supreme Being, then, transcending both good and evil, and freed from impurities, unites himself with *Brahman*' (Sharvananda, Swami, 1989) ^[9].

A question arises then as to what is the difference between deep sleep and *turiya*? In the words of Gaudapada, "Deep Sleep (*sushupti*) does not know anything either of the self or the non-self, either of truth or of untruth, but *turiya* is ever existent and ever all-seeing" (*Mandukya Karika*, I.7.12). Further, he says that dream is the wrong apprehension of reality. Sleep is a state in which one does not know what reality is, and when the false experience in these two states disappears, *turiya* is realised (*Mandukya Karika*, I.7.15). In deep sleep, the mind is withdrawn, but in *turiya*, the mind is disciplined but not withdrawn. Such a seeker gets united with *Brahman*, who is fearless and the light of whose knowledge shines in every direction (*Mandukya Karika*, III.35). However, this self which is the ultimate reality remains unknown in the first three states of consciousness, but the individual soul, sleeping under the influence of ignorance (*maya*) is awakened, realises non-duality which is beginningless (*anadi*) and endless (*ananta*) - *Mandukya Karika*, I.7.16).

Thus *Mandukyopanishad* gives the characteristics of four states of consciousness and calls on the spiritual seeker to

know, understand and contemplate on all states and attain *turiya* for attaining the highest goal of human spiritual existence i.e. liberation (*moksha*) and total spiritual freedom.

Samadhi - Transcendental consciousness

A spiritual seeker, before attaining transcendental consciousness (*samadhi*) may get some hallucinations and mystical powers which may obstruct the final path of progress. Infact, Lord Buddha while attaining *nirvana* had also reached this transcendental state. According to *Upanishads*, a person who has experienced the state of transcendental consciousness or has a glimpse of ultimate nature of reality returns to the normal state and remains in the intermediate state in which his consciousness appears to be both normal and transcendental. This state is called *bhavamukta* (free from emotions or feelings). This mystic experience or transcendental experience is not a static one but a dynamic process for a practitioner. Sri Ramakrishna, from his own mystical experience, described the different levels of perception of God. To quote, "When one attains *samadhi* (Transcendental consciousness), then only comes to him the knowledge of *Brahman*. Then only does he attain the vision of God. In the ecstatic realisation, all thoughts cease. One becomes perfectly silent; there is no power of speech left by which to express *Brahman*" (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6].

The *Bhagavad Gita* explains about this state in a verse as under: "His heart is with *Brahman*, his eye in all things sees only *Brahman*, equally present knows his own *Atman* in every creature and all creation within that *Atman*. That yogi sees me in all things and all things within me. He never loses sight of me, nor I of him. He is established in union with me, and worships me devoutly in all beings, that Yogi abides in me, no matter what his mode of life." (BG V.24-31).

In Jainism, a seeker has to attain perfect knowledge called *kevala* and free himself from the bonds of ignorance. This *kevala* is the knowledge of the soul equivalent to the transcendental knowledge of the *Upanishads* and the *nirvana* of the Buddhists (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6]. Buddha, although remained silent regarding the existence of God or consciousness, yet spoke of it in negative terms for his description such as freedom from misery, death, sensuality, ego, delusion and ignorance. This ultimate freedom is called noble kind of wisdom which is akin to the Vedantic transcendental knowledge (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6].

Conclusion

According to Swami Prabhavananda, transcendental consciousness (*samadhi*) can not be investigated by scientific methods as those researches depend only on sensorial experiences and this is beyond sense – perception. A transcendental state which is also called as *samadhi*, *turiya*, *nirvana* or *kevala* can be experienced by any serious spiritual seeker which has been established from the Vedic age to the present. Such an illumination of the soul transforms the spiritual seeker, who in turn can rise above the dichotomies of life (*jivana dvandva*), see the multiplicity and reality with equipoise, steady wisdom, and behind these changing phenomena he perceives the world of relativity and though he sees the world, he sees *Brahman* everywhere (*Kathamrta*, Vol I) as told by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Finally, the sages and seers who experienced this transcendental consciousness emerge and start narrating their experiences not for their own sake, but for the good of their fellow men

(Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977) ^[6] which Krishna calls as *lokasamgraha* in the *Bhagavadgita*.

End notes

1. Seven instruments are: earth (*prithvi*), water (*apaha*), air (*vayu*), fire (*tejas*), ether (*akasha*), sun (*surya*) and heaven (*svarga*).

Nineteen channels are: *manas* (mind), *chitta* (mind stuff), egoism, *buddhi* (determinative faculty), five vital airs (*prana*, *apana*, *samana*, *udana* and *vyana*), five sense organs (eyes, ear, nose, tongue and skin) and five motor organs (pair of hands, feet, mouth, excretory and generative organs).

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