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Vedantic model of consciousness as reflected in the Kāthopaniṣad: A study

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Abstract:

The philosophical wisdom of Indian knowledge system is mainly based on the upaniṣads, which are otherwise known as Vedānta. According to Vedānta, consciousness is the living energy and the fundamental quality of life particle and it is purely spiritual. There are two categories of consciousness, universal and individual. The Supreme Being is conscious of everything in the universe where as the living Entities are conscious of only themselves. The ontological nature of consciousness is non-physical. śāṅkhya darśan of the śrīmadbhāgavatam (canto 3, ch.26) explains that jīva, ife, is characterized by the presence of a quantum of consciousness and it remains in a separate domain. It is the source of all our knowledge and experience.

From the principal upaniṣads, this paper concentrates only on kāthopaniṣad and draws some of the concept of vedantic model of consciousness, vedantic hierarchy of human body, senses, mind, intelligence and model of the chariot, relevant diagrams and their scientific approach in this regard. Hence, the concept of consciousness through the upaniṣadic thought originated in India thousands of years ago. The upaniṣadic seers gave rational interpretations to their experiences of Yoga and consciousness and brought about a practical and scientifically sound method within everyone's reach.

Keyword: Kāthopaniṣad, vedānta, spiritual, consciousness, yoga

1. Introduction

The Upaniṣads which are the concluding portion as well as the essence of the Veda and are therefore rightly called *Vedānta*. Gradually the word came to signify any secret teaching about reality and it is used by the Upaniṣads in this sense, i.e. Rahasya or *Gūhyavidyā*. The Upaniṣads are the mines of divine wisdom. They are eternal sources of knowledge, one becomes immortal.

From the Principal Upaniṣads, Kāthopaniṣad, also called as Kāthokopaniṣad which belongs to the *Taittirīya* school of the kṛṣṇa *Yajur-Veda*. It teaches self-knowledge through a story that centres round a dialogue between Yama, the presiding deity of death and *Naciketas*, an intelligent *Brāhmin* lad. In the *Upaniṣad*, the third request is one for enlightenment on the 'great transition' which is called death. The Upaniṣad consists of two chapters, each of which has three *vallīs* or sections. The Kāthopaniṣad is very comprehensive, which is also very popular. Hence, the concept and practice of Yoga and Supreme consciousness through Upaniṣadic thought originated in India thousand years ago. The upaniṣadic seers gave rational interpretations to their experiences of Yoga and consciousness and brought about a practical and scientifically sound method within everyone's reach. In this regard, this paper concentrates only on the concept of Vedāntic model of consciousness, Vedantic hierarchy of human body, senses, mind, intelligence, model of chariot and their scientific approach.

2. Vedantic Consciousness

We can all agree that consciousness is one of the most important characteristics of life. Nobody can deny its existence. It is the birth place of noble human qualities such as forgiveness, humility, love etc, and it is also the birth place of sacrifice, tolerance and truthfulness. In fact, it is the birthplace of even the creative scientific theories being guided by the Supreme Spirit, God.

According to *Vedānta*, consciousness is a fundamental quality of the 'Spiriton'. Thus it is purely spiritual and transcendental to matter.

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As explained earlier, matter is the inferior energy of the Supreme Lord. It is inferior because matter, however complex it may be, will never have conscious symptoms. On the other hand, the living entities are the superior because they have consciousness. The renowned Physicist, Eugene Wigner also expressed, “There are two kinds of reality or existence; the existence of my consciousness and the reality or existence of everything else.”^[1]

All living beings, microorganisms, birds, animals etc, possesses different degrees of consciousness. In other words, all these living beings covered by different degrees of the three modes of material nature. Microorganisms exhibit very little symptom of consciousness because of the very thick layers of covering of the material modes. However, they possess consciousness. The well-known biologist, George Wald and others such as, Lynn Margulis indicated that protozoa, single-celled animals and bacteria also possess consciousness.

According to *Vedānta*, consciousness is not a function of the Brain. As said earlier in science that the brain in developed living beings is an important organ of the body machinery in which the symptom of consciousness is transmitted. The conscious energy is transmitted from the spiritual soul, ‘Spiriton.’ Thus consciousness is purely spiritual. It is the living energy and the fundamental quality of life particle, ‘Spiriton’. Just like a computer, however sophisticated it may be, will never be conscious because it will never have understanding of what it does. The program has to be supplied by an intelligent programmer. The computer is simply relaying the circumstantial choice fed into the program by the programmer, the human soul. It will be a good research field to study how the conscious energy is transmitted from the spiritual soul, ‘Spiriton’ to the brain.

Furthermore, *Vedānta* describes matter as the field of activity and by its nature, matter is inert and has no consciousness. But there is interaction between the individual particle of consciousness and matter through universal consciousness. Moreover, the natural events that are taking place in the material world are maps of the events occurring in the spiritual plane (consciousness). About four centuries ago, the famous French philosopher Rene Descartes concluded that he knew one thing for certain: “I think, therefore I am.”^[2] From the *Vedāntic* point of view, the expression, ‘I am’ is the conscious experience and inherent transcendental property of the self. Thousands of years before Descartes, the sages of the Vedic tradition realized the principle even a step further, ‘*aham brahmāsmi*’, meaning I am Brahman, I am spirit, conscious self. This is conscious for which the Sanskrit word *Cetanā*. The act of thinking by a human being is the symptom of consciousness and it belongs to life. False consciousness and it belongs to life. False consciousness is exhibited under the impression that ‘I am a product of material nature.’

Thus modern biologists and biochemists should include the study of consciousness in their research works. The field should not be left mainly to the neuroscientists, quantum physicists, psychologists and philosophers only.

3. Mind, Body and Spiritual particle, ‘Spiriton’

According to *Vedānta*, every living being is a conscious life particle, spirit on or āt man and has mind and intelligence. *Vedānta* proclaims that all living beings including

microorganisms possess mind and intelligence George Wald, the Nobel Laureate in biology, was struck by the intelligence depicted in the behavior of a ciliate protozon in its search for food he remarked, “That’s just what I would do !”

There are two types of activities in the behavior of a person-physical activity and mental or psychological activity. When we want to do a certain action, first our mind makes a plan. Then it is carried out physically. However, according to *Vedānta*, human activities are ultimately carried out by the will of the conscious life *Vedānta* gives the following hierarchy of brain, mind and consciousness (refer Figure-1).

There is a verse in B.G., i.e.,
indriyāṇi parāṇyāhur
indriyebhyaḥ paraṁ manaḥ
manasas tu parā buddhir
yo buddheḥ paratas tu saḥ.^[3]

Translation – “The working senses are superior to dull matter, mind is higher than the senses, intelligence is still higher than the mind, and he (the soul) is even higher than the intelligence.”

In this respect, the interaction of consciousness with intelligence, mind and senses is described in the *Katha Upaniṣad* (1.3.3-4) as a chariot imagery as follows and there is a mantra in *Kāthopaniṣad*, i.e.,

ātmānaṁ rathinaṁ viddhi
śarīraṁ rathameva ca /
buddhiṁ tu sārathiṁ viddhi
manaḥ pragrahaṁ eva ca //

Translation: “The individual is the passenger in the chariot of the material body, and intelligence is the driver. Mind is the driving instrument, and the senses are the horses. The self is thus the enjoyer or sufferer in the association of the mind and senses. So, it is understood by great thinkers.”

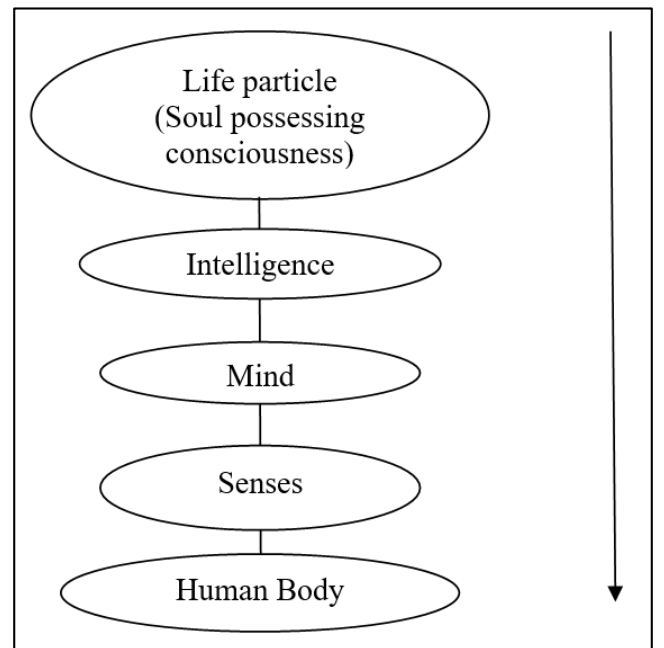


Fig 1: Vedantic Hierarchy of Human Body, Senses, Mind, Intelligence, and consciousness.

¹ Eugene P. Wigner, “Two kinds of Reality,” *The Monist*, Vol. 48, 1964, p.250.

² Discours de la Mithode, 1637.

³ B.G, Abbre. BhagavadGītā, 3.42

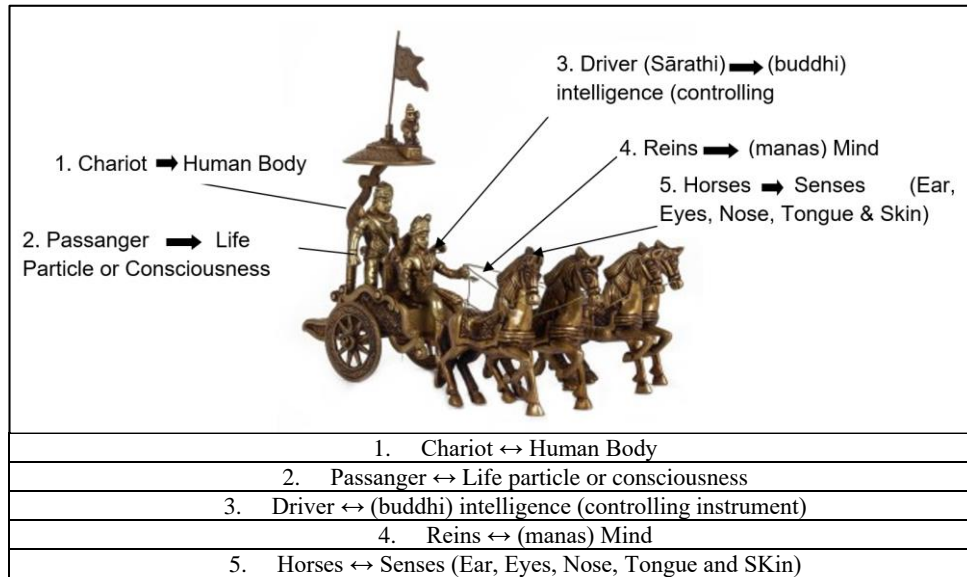


Fig 2: Chariot model (from the Kathopaniṣad) of the interaction of consciousness with the Human Body, Senses, Mind and Intelligence.

4. Discussion

The individual consciousness or the life particle is compared to the passenger because he is the chief occupant and thus enjoyer or sufferer of the journey. The horses indicate the senses that always drag the chariot of the human body to the objects of the sense. Intelligence is compared to the driver because the driver employs necessary discrimination for a successful and comfortable journey. Reins are compared to the mind because they are directly connected to the horses (senses) and are guided by the driver (intelligence). An able driver (intelligence) takes control of the reins (mind) connected to the horses (senses) to properly guide the chariot towards its destination by discrimination. In this way the passenger or the soul can reach the desired destination by proper use of all the faculties. On the other hand, if any of the faculties are not controlled and coordinated properly in the hierarchy, sooner or later there may be an accident.

5. Conclusion

As scientists begin to explore the fundamental components of material nature, they also begin to comprehend another fundamental property of life called consciousness, whose presence we all experience. Consciousness has different connotations ranging from awareness of one's perception to feelings, and the recognition of oneself as an agent endowed with purpose and free will. It is the very basis of science and religion.

Many scholars in the fields of psychology, neurobiology, cognitive science, philosophy, etc., are keenly investigating the nature of consciousness. Scientists like Roger Penrose are advocating the need for a new science to satisfactorily explain the phenomenon of consciousness. There are others like Max Planck and Niels Bohr, who admit that consciousness cannot be understood within the scientific framework. Thus by careful study of science one can appreciate that consciousness is beyond matter, which is the conclusion of spiritual traditions.

Consciousness study has been a part of spiritual wisdom. In the ancient literatures of India, such as Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, Śrīmad BhagavadGītā, Upaniṣads, like Kathopaniṣad, the topic of consciousness has been treated as a Central issue. These scriptures teach how to evolve our consciousness to perfection. When the mind is fully trained and consciousness is fully purified a person can transcend the temptations caused

by gross senses. When such a stage is achieved a person can certainly develop a culture of lasting peace.

The theme of the Upaniṣad is the welfare of humanity in all its aspects. Though it holds spiritual perfection of the ultimate goal of life, it has given due prominence to cultivation of social, moral, ethical and scientific values of the concepts of Upaniṣadic Sādhanā, Praṇava, Brahma-Vidyā, Yoga and consciousness in life as a necessary prerequisite. The mission of the Upaniṣad seems to bring about oneness of mind amongst people by bringing about the destruction of hatred. It promotes right understanding and right action among people. Although the Upaniṣad teaches the highest knowledge of the ultimate reality, 'The Supreme Consciousness', i.e. Brahman. Thus in the search for a deeper understanding of life and consciousness, inclusion of spirituality within the scientific research works can become a significant factor. In other words science and spirituality/ religion should be important partners in this most profound area of human quest. In this respect, we must adopt our ancient scripture, like Kathopaniṣad, that immensely stressed on the glory of consciousness, the nature of Supreme self, the concept of Yoga, etc. and those are the most precious things for the need of global consciousness and making us introspective and correct our personality.

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